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ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

The Trickster in Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* and Works of Charles W. Chesnutt

Šibalství v *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* Hermana Melvilla a díle Charles W. Chesnutta

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Alžběta Kyselová

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Vedoucí práce: Prof. David L. Robbins, Ph.D

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Key words:

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Klíčová slova:

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Abstract

Tricksters are popular cultural and literary characters which appear across regions and genres in various forms. The characters Uncle Julius from *The Conjure Woman* collection of short stories by Charles W. Chesnutt, and the confidence man from Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* are both tricksters who are based on strong cultural backgrounds: the African (-American) religious trickster, and real life con artist William Thompson, respectively. This thesis sets out to compare the tricksters in thematic and structural elements. The origins of the literary characters help shape the readers' expectations and perception of the tricksters. Melville and Chesnutt encourage the stereotypical reading of the characters while also including an alternative one in the text. The conflict of perceptions serves to introduce a number of social topics regarding slavery in *The Conjure Woman* and self-reliance in *The Confidence-Man*, both of which ultimately point to the problematic distribution of freedom in American society. The tricksters appear both as literary characters and literary devices, corresponding with the ambiguous nature of the trickster archetype.

Abstrakt

Šibalové jsou oblíbenými kulturními a literárními postavami, které se objevují napříč regiony a žánry v různých podobách. Postavy Strýčka Julia ze sbírky povídek Charles W. Chesnutta *The Conjure Woman* a podvodníka z románu *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* od Hermana Melvilla jsou obě šibaly vycházející z významných kulturních tradic: afro(-amerického) náboženského šibala, respektive skutečného podvodníka Williama Thompsona. Tato práce porovnává šibaly v tematických a structurálních prvcích. Původ literárních postav určuje očekávání čtenářů a jejich vnímání těchto šibalů. Melville a Chesnutt u čtenářů podporují stereotypní chápání postav, ale zároveň do textů přidávají alternativní pojetí. Střet těchto vnímání slouží k představení několika sociálních témat týkajících se otroctví v *The Conjure Woman* a soběstačnosti v *The Confidence-Man*, obě tato témata v důsledku poukazují na problematické rozložení svobody v americké společnosti. Šibalové se v textech objevují jako literární postavy a také jako literární nástroje, čímž naplňují rys mnohoznačnosti typický pro archetyp šibala.

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1. Introduction

Trickster characters are largely popular for their entertaining value, therefore in many cases the term trickster tends to be overused. The number of research fields that have adopted the term trickster for their purposes serves to shows the significance and extent of the phenomenon; simultaneously, however, it blurs the distinct and clear conception of what a trickster actually is. For instance, the word trickster was first used in the 18th century to describe a cheat or one who deceives. Technically, the original term had the same meaning as today's confidence man. Tricksters only received their mythological connotation (notably, not excluding literary manifestations) in the 2nd half of the 19th century.[1] Even historically then, the term underwent a considerable development. Nevertheless, the broadening of usage and along with it the loss of precision of meaning, troubles particularly those who rely on the term for a narrow sense of meaning. Michael P. Carroll set out to review mythological tales from North America, South America and Africa in order to capture the purest definition of the trickster character.[2] The classification of tricksters within a geographical or cultural region is fairly common (this was especially popular in the beginning of the 20th century), yet a general comparison of all variations would serve no purpose other than the generating of a few essential features. He proposes to award the trickster label only to those mythological characters who simultaneously exhibit the attributes of what he calls the selfish-buffoon and the culture hero. From this we can assume that the trickster follows his own whims, is witty but not accident-proof, and despite his unconcern for others is acknowledged by his culture for his entertaining and possibly beneficial qualities.

William J. Hynes and William G. Doty propose in their collection of studies on the topic of the trickster a matrix of characteristics to help outline the essensial qualities and traits the character embodies. They realize the immense variability of tricksters across cultures and contexts, which is why they opted for a definition that would be functional and fairly specific and yet not overly restrictive towards marginal cases. “Genuine” tricksters will bear all or a majority of the listed features while some characters labeled as tricksters might in fact only carry a few of them. The universal application in combination with a complex approach that does not reduce the intricacy of the trickster for the sake of a clear definition is what in my view makes Hynes and

[1] William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, “Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues: the Problem of the Trickster”, *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, eds. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997) 14

[2] Michael P. Carroll, “The Trickster as Selfish-Buffoon and Culture Hero”, *Ethos*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 1984) 106-107

Doty's measure for the degree of "tricksterness", as they call it, the most instrumental definition available, which is why it is presented in summary here. Still, it must be mentioned, it is intended primarily for the classification of mythological tricksters, not fictional literary ones. The suggested six parameters consist of the following[3]:

Ambiguous and anomalous. This refers to the binary nature of the trickster character, who at once embodies two extremes of the same phenomenon, e. g. order and chaos, life and death, sacred and profane, or culture and nature. From this occupation of opposites we can assert that tricksters disrespect natural divisions or borders, regardless of what type they are – religious, cultural, linguistic, epistemological, or metaphysical. Their oblivion of boundaries allows them to be in continual transit, thus escaping definition – there is always more to them than meets the eye. In this sense they are seen as disassemblers and decontructors since they are always an exception to the rule, their presence disturbs order.

Deceiver and Trick-Player. The title of this section is self-explanatory, tricksters use lies and tricks to achieve a goal, usually in connection with a hunt for food or satisfying other primary needs. Their activities are frequently the primal cause of misfortunes or disorder in many cultures. Whether their fooling games stem from the joy mischief brings them or from silly misjudgment, their plan will occasionally reverse itself upon them and they get caught in their own trick.

Shape-Shifter. Changing their appearance is one of the distinctive features of tricksters. It proves to be a handy means to disguising their identity. The extent of the skill varies from culture to culture; some tricksters only wear masks or a change of clothes, others transform into animals or even objects.

Situation-Inventor. This point captures the ability of tricksters to invert any course of events and turn the standard order of things upside down and inside out. Nothing remains in its original place or state, everything is reversed. No belief, person or place can resist the force of a trickster. Related to this is the tricksters' habit of violating rituals and beliefs.

*Messenger and Imitator of the Gods.*The ease with which tricksters cross boarders allows them to enjoy a bit of both the divine and human worlds. They are the only exceptions to the strict division between hierarchies which actually reinforces the barrier. People through the mischief of tricksters get their share of the sacred (be it information or some improvement to life, e. g. fire) without suffering a punishment. Tricksters willingly break the taboo for the community and steal from the gods, although rarely is the well-being of others their motive for action. The

[3] William J. Hynes, "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: a Heuristic Guide", *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, eds. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997) 34-44

gods, on the other hand, welcome the service of a messenger who can handle their duties for them (punishing the disobedient and so on). In this way, the tricksters enable both worlds to evolve and develop.

Sacred and Lewd Bricoleur. Since hunger is frequently the main reason for tricksters' actions, it comes as no surprise that primal instincts and the violation of taboos associated with them (sexual, gastronomic, or scatological) are recurring elements in trickster myths. However, due to the bricoleur nature of tricksters, they can transform any originally lewd and obscene feats into moments of "insight, vitality and new inventive creations."[4]

At first glance it is obvious that not all parameters can be universally applied to non-mythological tricksters. Despite this, the topics that are brought to attention through this trait set can easily be adapted across genres or fields of study as they essentially hit at the nature of "tricksterness" and the root of the tricksters' deceiving behavior, varying as those might be. In this thesis the trickster characters dealt with are literary characters in works of fiction. However, as such they surely draw on mythological legends and therefore although they are not true mythological tricksters by the standards of sociologists and anthropologists such as Carroll, the connection between the tradition and literary interpretation can still be considered relevant enough for the definition of mythological tricksters to be used as a helpful guideline for opening the discussion.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the trickster characters in the novel *The Confidence-Man* by Herman Melville and the collection of short stories *The Conjure* Woman by Charles W. Chesnutt, both written in the second half of the 19th century. The works feature a character whose performance in the story is likely to be described as deceptive. It is my belief that both Uncle Julius, the ex-slave in Chesnutt's texts, and the confidence man on Melville's river boat are examples of a typical American trickster character. It is the intent of this study to investigate the origins and cultural, social and philosophical backgrounds of the respective tricksters to establish their cheating features and state the nature of their deceiving behavior. That being said, although these characters are in my view decidedly American cultural staples, they are each a product of different contexts and therefore essential distinctions are expected to manifest themselves in structural or thematic comparisons. Additionally, the authors each implement their trickster for specific purposes and these motives no doubt shape the function of the tricksters in the text. To examine thoroughly all aspects of Uncle Julius' and the confidence man's presence and significance in the works, the thesis is divided into four sections. The first two chapters will be

[4] Hynes 42

dedicated to creating historical, cultural and social contexts for the individual tricksters to establish the reasons the authors had for selecting the trickster for their work and also to outline the adjustments the authors make to accommodate their visions. The third chapter will focus on a direct comparison of thematic, linguistic and structural properties of *The Confidence-Man* and *The Conjure Woman* in relation to the tricksters. The final chapter will conclude the analysis with a summary of the most prominent findings concerning the presentation and function of Uncle Julius and the confidence man in Chesnutt's and Melville's texts.

2. The Conjure Woman

Charles Wadell Chesnutt's series of short stories was published in book form as *The Conjure Woman* in 1899 and has become a classic example of Southern African American folk literature. Although all the stories in the collection contain the traditional elements of local color or plantation literature, the trickster character in *The Conjure Woman* stories is of a more refined and subtle nature than readers are usually accustomed to in African American tales. Chesnutt's use of the trickster is more complex, which results in the impression that his stories barely fit into the category of trickster tales. To analyze the trickster character in depth, along with his function in Chesnutt's collection, I will first attempt to capture the essential features of the original trickster archetype, tracing its African roots and following its development in America in the newly formed African American context. This historical, social and cultural background should help approximate the concept of the trickster in the African American realm, and clarify Chesnutt's approach and interpretation of it. The second part of the chapter will deal with the formal and thematic features of *The Conjure Woman* in relation to the trickster character in the text.

For many decades the origin of the African American trickster tales was taken for granted and automatically assigned to African mythology since African American slaves were brought to the American continent from Africa. African tales feature animal characters with human behavior, analogously to the early African American trickster tales. However, Native American stories and some European folk tales also have animal instead of human figures. The plot of such stories tends to be simple and short; therefore, it becomes easy to notice similarities in motives, actions or structures between tales from different parts of the world, making any decision about the true origin of the text problematic. The borrowing of African American and Native American cultures from each other is well documented, and the possibility of a European influence cannot be ruled out. In the past, folklorists discussing the matter relied heavily on political aspects and animal similarities in their judgment of the myths' origins, leading them to conflicting conclusions. Alan Dundes points out in his review of the origins issue[5] that only an objective method can successfully classify the texts. The generally approved system is a catalog of either motifs or actions or narrative elements. Each collected myth is analyzed and registered under

[5] Alan Dundes, "African Tales Among the North American Indians", *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, ed. Alan Dundes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 114

universal codes, allowing one to see all tales with the same feature under the same code. This index has proved that indeed it is highly probable that the majority of African American trickster tales, for the most part, originated on the African continent. This confirmation brings us to the evaluation of African trickster tales, and African mythology as the foundation of the African American trickster essence.

2.1 African religion and mythology

With many ethnic societies living in isolation, Africa as a continent naturally developed more than one Black African culture. During the "Middle Passage" and the traumatic transition of Africans into a new environment, all these individual tribal traditions molded together into a Pan-African culture, otherwise non-existent in Africa, and with the additional influence of Native American and European (Christian) elements later resulted in the African-American culture.

However diverse the individual tribal cultures are, they all seem to share the same idea of a trickster figure. In West Africa, where most African slaves came from, the trickster is known as Eshu (or Esu) - Elegbara in Yoruba cultures (Nigeria area), and Legba in Fon tribes (mainly Benin). The recognition of this trickster throughout Africa is such that today we can call it a trademark component of early slave narratives – clearly it was a figure that resonated with all slaves. In the respective African traditions the trickster has its own unique and specific qualities; nonetheless, the principle essence of the phenomenon is identical and consistent.

Eshu is one of the West African deities, *orisha*, and appears in various forms across Africa. As a trickster he possesses all the evident traits such as wit, malice, disobedience and sexual appetite. In culture he can be found as a religious figure, in legends, and in animal form in the animal trickster tales, which shows just how diverse his position in African tradition is, spanning from the highest authority to a devious clown. His primal power is the ability to communicate in any language, including the language of gods, making him the messenger between earth and heaven, the guardian of the crossroads.[6] His position of being "in between" is very strategic. According to legends, Eshu was smart enough to recognize this and by cheating the gods to appoint himself into it, making himself indispensable both for humans and the deity, as the division between godly and mortal in African culture is very fine. Gods rely on people for food in the form of sacrifice, and people look up to the deity for their knowledge of fate, which each individual has chosen for himself but lost memory of at birth. Without a mediator, humans easily forget their gods and let them starve. It is in Eshu's personal interest to keep the channel

[6] Erik Davis, "Trickster At the Crossroads", *Gnosis*, Vol. 19 (Spring 1991), available at <www.levity.com/figment/trickster.html> 25 October 2013

open, since he is paid a provision from any negotiation between the two spheres, yet his role seems to benefit all parties as it keeps the cosmos in balance. But Eshu wouldn't be a trickster if he didn't occasionally take advantage of his shifty qualities, and often he provokes conflict just to ignite a dispute, either for food or for fun.

To grasp fully the trickster's evasiveness it is necessary to clarify the fixed nature of the system Eshu is a part of, because it is exactly that rigidity that creates the demand for a reckless and spontaneous force, necessary to keep the order alive. The constants in this case are the social hierarchy (which also reflected financial, age, status, or spiritual role differences), harsh natural environment and the approach to destiny. All these matters were taken seriously and treated as a given fact since in the eyes of the African community they were permanent. One's fate is predetermined before entering the human world; it is self selected and unavoidable. To escape an unfavorable situation caused by natural disasters, personal troubles, and social conflicts, Africans had the option of finding solace with the trickster.[7] As an agent he offers a solution by delivering gods' will over an individual's fate (through a medicine man or diviner), and to the audience of the tales he gives hope and an escape from reality through humor and irony.

Technically, Eshu's role is strictly specified too. The divination process is a set ritual: a traveler visits the messenger, tells the story of his dilemma, Eshu states the price for an answer and gives the stranger 16 palm nuts to cast. Every possible combination of the nuts (odds and evens) is assigned a figure of Ifa. Ifa is the deity who represents all gods in the revelation of fate. He is the bearer of the knowledge of destiny. Ifa forms a team with Eshu, and by presenting the palm nuts in a specific configuration, "a signature", he signals to Eshu the will of gods. Each signature corresponds to several verses that Eshu can choose from to tell the traveler.[8] The paradox in the divinity process is that the verses which are meant to solve problems of people are so ambiguous, metaphorical and enigmatic that they need to be deciphered before they can be of any use: "Ifa is the god of determinate meanings, but his meaning must be rendered by analogy. [Eshu], god of indeterminacy, rules this interpretive process, he is the god of interpretation because he embodies the ambiguity of figurative language. (...)"[9] Although people come to Eshu for answers, in return for their sacrifice they receive questions. Hyde states that tricksters are "masters of reversal" and Eshu being a special case "reverses fortune".[10] The reason this reversal actually works, is because the universal order around them is so rigid, any act of creativity and questioning of the fixed is a solution to the issue. Eshu forces people through his puzzles into a

[7]John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 28-29
[8]Henry L. Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 10-11
[9]Gates 21
[10]Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008) 118

decision, instead of their getting framed by the passive system. Therefore the Yoruba simultaneously believe in the predetermination of fate, as well as the possibility of altering it, two seemingly excluding mindsets.[11]

If the trickster didn't exist in African mythology, there would be no place for chance, accident or free will. In other words, his presence stands as an explanation for unaccountable events. Hyde focuses on the contrast of fate and accident and attributes it to Ifa and Eshu: "Out of the friendship of Ifa and Eshu (…) we get no tragic opposition, then; we get, rather, the creative play of necessity and chance, certainty and uncertainty, archetype and ectype, destiny and its exceptions, the way and the no-way, the net of fate and the escape from that net."[12]

Divination is by no means a form of magic. The formula delivered by Eshu or the diviner is conditioned by the code created by the casting of the palm nuts. In total there are 16! combinations with several versions of the same signature, which means that the only special ability the diviner needs is a good memory and narrative skills (the formulas often convey the message in the form of a story). All he promises the client is a word of advice but not a supernatural spell to miraculously carry his troubles away. It is important to realize this as in African animal trickster stories and later also in the African American ones, the trickster's forte was exactly his ability to do without magical powers, only leaning on his ingenuity and tongue. To turn to magic for aid in the African community was an option; however, to do so was considered a terrible crime. Although it played an important role in everyday life, manipulation with magic for personal gain at the expense of others did not abide by the religious African worldview since it would jeopardize the integrity of social life and the community's values. Roberts explains the source of the fear of magic use: "The attitude towards magic in African cultures derives from their socio-religious view of human beings as intricately linked to each other by a mystical force in the universe which also connects them to nature and the supernatural in a hierarchical and interdependent relationship."[13] Harmony is secured by each being acting in accordance with their designated position in the universe. The feeling of responsibility over society and the need to nurture communal bonds is inherent in the African individual. "Consequently, to act in disharmony with one's own community by seeking individual gain through magic was considered one of the worst moral evils that individuals could commit, and exposed them to even greater acts of magic by those empowered in the community to punish evil."[14] The trickster stories then served as educational lessons presenting socially acceptable

[11]Hyde 116
[12]Hyde 117
[13]Roberts 27
[14]Roberts 28

patterns of behavior for individuals in unfortunate circumstances, accentuating the advantageous properties of wit and flexibility. No matter how slyly and greedily the trickster acts, it is not offensive as long as he does not resolve to use magic. It is through this justification that lying is perceived as tolerable, and when dexterously handled, even admired.

To summarize the basic elements of the African trickster tradition, the power of narrative and the attitude towards fate appear to be the most salient. Fate is unalterable unless you are an adept talker (or have one at your disposal). A clever speech will open limitless possibilities even to the underdog. The preference of narrative skill over any other ability results in a rich variety of narrative disciplines and an appreciation for oral tradition, effectively turning speech into a weapon tolerated in the community. In this light it becomes obvious why a willful lie, in most societies usually considered a dishonest act, suddenly transforms into a positive expression cheered on and a demonstration of good brains. It is clear that these features are not mere properties of the tales, but are deeply embedded into the values of African people. They shape and define the mentality of Africans, significantly impacting the frame of mind they apply to their environment even outside of the African continent, and particularly after their passage to America. What this approach to life and destiny translated into in the environment of slavery, was the passive acceptance of a rigid system they had no deciding power in, and the firm belief that although their life was determined for them, they could alter it in little ways with the use of divination, i. e. a mediator who could give them insight into the unknown through his connection with the spiritual. The major difference between the fixed social hierarchy in Africa and America was that in the African context it was in everyone's interest to preserve the strict social system and thus maintain order and material benefit. The only party that prospered from the one-sided social system in slavery, were the American slave owners; the African Americans were being deprived of basic living needs but also of the status of human beings.

2.2 Plantation life

After Africans were transported to America, they were exposed to two violations of humanity that resulted in their extreme life conditions. Firstly, they were denied the status of independent human beings when they were declared property of their masters. This led to the prejudice about their natural crassness, which was further strengthened by their origins in an unchristian and supposedly savage society, and also supported by the education ban for all slaves imposed by slave owners. All of these measures served to create a hierarchy on which plantation businesses successfully capitalized. The traditional relationship between employer and employee

was distorted in order to maximize profit, and such a scheme was possible only by limiting the workers in practically every aspect of their lives – living and working conditions. Conduct like that would hardly be justifiable when dealing with people, which meant the system designed a legal exception for Africans classifying them as property, with the view of safeguarding the money-making plantation model. The strategy to warrant the inequality with racial difference proved to be shrewd on the part of the Whites because it left no room for debate: race as a feature is permanent and in the case of Africans in the company of Whites clearly visible, therefore, undeniable. Moreover, the social barrier the arrangement brought deeply affected the approach of white Americans towards African Americans for centuries to come due to the feeling of self-righteousness it instigated in the former. An opposition, black vs. white, was established. Blackness was assigned a negative significance and became a strong social and psychological marker. Once a mental feature like that is recognized, it is a difficult and lengthy process to annul the contrast it signifies. The second act against humanity implemented against slaves was the unbearable work ethic expected and demanded from them on plantations. The plantation owners often tried to give the impression that it was in the slaves' interest to participate in the work, creating the illusion of a partnership between them; however quite obviously the slaves had no reason to believe in any form of cooperation and these gimmicks only highlighted the one-sidedness of the system. Although they were surrounded by an abundance of food and other provisions, they were denied free access to it[15]. The master's cheat (treating people as property) justified the lying of the slaves, since they couldn't accept the American morality as their own:

> Given the desperate and oppressive circumstances under which they lived, enslaved Africans could not be overly concerned with the masters' definition of the "morality" of behaviors that enhanced their prospects for physical survival and material well-being. The task that they confronted, however, was how to make such individually devised solutions to a collective problem function as a behavioral strategy for the group without endangering their adaptability or the physical well-being of members of their community.[16]

2.3 Evolution of trickster stories

The trickster character in the stories of the African-Americans underwent a notable transformation from the original African trickster legends. As time progressed the enslaved modified the setting, themes and characters of the tales to better accommodate their

[15]Roberts 36
[16]Roberts 3

circumstances. The next few lines will summarize the key features of the evolution of the trickster stories from the animal trickster tales, to John the Slave stories, and to the conjure stories.

The African-American animal trickster tales formally resemble those of African societies, which served to remind people of social responsibilities and anchor African religious values. However, the switch of continents and therefore social hierarchies resulted in a loss of the religious aspect embedded in the tales (slave masters suppressed all religious practices), this angle of the narratives faded out and became irrelevant to the listeners. What did remain preserved in the tales, though, was the philosophical perspective on survival – gaining advantage through cheating, lying and trickery is acceptable in dire straits. The characters in the tales continue to be animals, the smaller the size, the wittier the brains. Since the American society viewed and treated Africans as inhuman creatures, the enslaved found it easy to identify with e.g. the rabbit (in Africa usually the spider) outsmarting a stronger animal. These tricksters were not heroes in the sense of a symbol of perfection and epitome of the good; they more represented hope for the desperate and served as models of advantageous behavior in extreme situations. Moreover, they were a form of revolt against a larger authority:

> Behaviors that circumvented the masters' power rather than directly challenging it, offered the greatest advantages in securing their interests. Therefore, in their everyday lives, enslaved Africans turned to behaviors which allowed them to subvert the masters' authority and control in ways that did not disrupt the system.[17]

In real life, the enslaved could never win and were never right, but in the trickster tales, they had a chance to heal their ego. Paradoxically, the image the White masters created for the Africans, and started to believe in, helped the slaves, since they saw them as inferior or pitied them – there were no high expectations. This misleading idea gave the enslaved room for manipulation.

> [Slaves] revealed in their animal trickster tales that through wit and trickery they could bring “trouble” to the masters in ways that constantly undermined their efforts to impose on them a value system that they had no reason to accept as a guide for action or as a reflection of their identity.[18]

So although the image the Africans were labeled with was not to their liking, they went along with it, as it was a good mask to hide under and allowed for rebellion in their own way. In the stories, the way they assume the role given to slaves by the system (the helpless rabbit),

[17]Roberts 32
[18]Roberts 43

seemingly giving in to it, yet then retaliate, is remarkable, since they manage all this within limitations forced upon them. Just as their status of property was imposed through a trick of words, through words the Africans fought back. They were capable of creating an identity under the one assigned to them.

Before closing the subject of animal tricksters, a specific character will still be mentioned – the signifying monkey. It appears in the genre of the Non-Standard Negro English subculture called "toasts". The signifying monkey is one of the canonical versions of this oral folklore which can be described as a battle between protagonists in the form of a long epic poem with usually complex metric arrangements[19]. The basic plot of the tales is the same (the monkey tricks the lion into thinking that the elephant had bad-mouthed him, the lion confronts the elephant but receives a beating, and returns to the monkey to get even, in which he is sometimes successful, other times not), the versions only differ in execution or personal style of the narrator (the rhythmic quality is very important in presentation). The monkey is a remnant of an alternative rendition of the African Eshu myth, where a monkey gives Eshu the 16 casting nuts and orders him to collect all the verses that match the individual combinations (signs) around the world. The monkey only gained independence from the divination legend in America (it has a strong position in Afro-Cuban mythology, for instance) and so is considered an Afro-American phenomenon[20]. It is certainly an important addition to the trickster repertoire, since the monkey does not act upon someone's request or on another's behalf, like Eshu does. The monkey is interested in its own well-being and as a result is purely selfish in its mischief.

Although the toast is the only instance where the original African monkey survives in folklore, it has become a symbol for the art of Afro-American rhetoric known as signifying (hence signifying monkey). The term as such has accumulated numerous definitions and layers of meaning, many of which are bound to a location and time. On a basic level the signifying in toasts can be viewed as verbal dueling, however, it also refers to a strategy of message or meaning encoding that is often carried out with an element of indirection, as Claudia Mitchell-Kernan writes in her study on the subject.[21] For a speech act to be understood as signifying the decoded message must be encoded with intention and deliberation. Mitchell-Kernan distinguishes between metaphorical signifying where "the speaker attempts to transmit his message indirectly and it is only by virtue of the hearers defining the utterance as signifying that the speaker's intent (to convey a particular message) is realized", and third-party signifying in

[19] William Labov et al., "Toasts", *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, ed. Alan Dundes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 330-331

[20] Gates, Jr. 14-15

[21] Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying", *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, ed. Alan Dundes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 311

which “the speaker may realize his aim only when the converse is true, that is, if the addressee fails to recognize the speech act as signifying”. The latter type is the one we observe in the toasts with the signifying monkey, and ill-will plays an important part in the scheme – enmity of the hearer towards the third-party makes the alleged rant more believable and the hearer is more likely to fall for it[22]. In these cases it is desirable for the hearer not to uncover the signifying before it reaches completion. In metaphorical signifying, on the other hand, if the hearer does not recognize that signifying is at play and reacts inadequately or not at all, it will damage their status in the eyes of those present. The content of a signifying utterance is two-fold, as there is the coded, implicit message that is veiled by a more obvious message[23]. The manner of coding is what gives signifying the potential to become a form of art, since linguistic skill of some can be both intricate and effortless at the same time. Therefore the function of signifying can vary depending on the purpose of the speaker – as a tool of insult, of entertainment, or perhaps of position or identity (re)establishment. Kermit E. Campbell promotes the last of these options in his paper encouraging the development of signifying abilities in students. He explains that he sees “signifying ultimately as the use of language or discourse to affirm cultural identity and community in the face of the imposition of cultural dominance and oppression”[24]. Campbell later adds that to him signifying is not just a “coping mechanism” and instead proclaims it as “an attitude towards life” since the insulting ritual results not just in humiliation per se but is meant to reveal the true status of the hearer (the lion is not the real king of the jungle since the elephant is stronger) which in turn affirms the identity of the speaker. Henry Louis Gates Jr. takes this aspect of signifying even further and develops a literary theory built entirely on the principles of signifying, which he calls Signifyin(g) to differentiate it. It is his assumption that the practice of signifying is a natural, unique and inherent feature of Afro-American literature and culture and proposes to establish a theory in lieu of others to avoid misconceptions stemming from analyzing black literary works through perspectives of different (white) cultures. His examination starts with a comparison of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, where signification is defined as the relationship between the signified and the signifier, which Gates in his theory replaces with a multiple relationship between the signified and the signifier and also the Signifier. Multiplicity is key, according to Gates, for it was first brought into the culture through Eshu, whom he interprets as the symbol of indeterminacy[25], and is expressed in actual Signifyin(g) by rhythmic or pattern elements and therefore also in interpretations. The discrepancy between the

[22]Mitchell-Kernan 322-323
[23]Mitchell-Kernan 312-314
[24]Kermit E. Campbell, “The Signifying Monkey Revisited: Vernacular Discourse and African American Personal Narratives”, *Journal of Advanced Composition*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 1994) 463-464
[25]Gates, Jr. 11

signifier and Signifier is the source of Signifyin(g). Gates repeatedly remarks that he sees Signifyin(g) as the trope of tropes or the figure of figures, in other words it is a mode of language use or a code.

This digression from tricksters into literary discourse serves to show the far-reaching impact of the signifying monkey for the Afro-American vernacular culture, despite the character of the monkey coming down in only one Afro-American tale.

A change in the trickster character came with the John the Slave stories sometime during the period of black chattel slavery. The John and Old Master cycle of tales offered a new perspective on the slave system since unlike the animal trickster tales, they were set directly into it. Rather than resembling children's stories, they were fictional accounts of real experience. There were several reasons for the transformation of the trickster character from an animal to a person. In the beginning of slavery the original African animal trickster sufficed to express the situation of the enslaved, just as it did in Africa – the behavior of the trickster was backed up by the religious views shared by the African community, which dwelt on the preservation of universal harmony for the benefit of society, and in turn also of the individual. All slaves recognized themselves as members of the pan-African community and took the animal trickster as their cultural hero. The ultimate message of the stories was still governed by the African religious/philosophical beliefs. As these were blocked out by the slave owners, and the traditional key for interpretation of the tales gradually disappeared, the trickster's purpose shifted. Also, the trickster tales were originally designed to protect the community from within, whereas the enslaved were at this point facing dangers from outside their group.[26] The trickster character promotes two types of behavior: rebellion, and the necessity for survival. Small acts of disobedience would not trouble the masters too much; however when exercised on a large scale, they decided to introduce an additional means of control over the slaves – black slave drivers. These were given responsibility over a number of slaves, which transformed the hierarchy of the system and complicated the preset opposition of blacks against whites. The slave holders managed to implement control from within the African community. At the same time, this step showed that the enslaved do in fact possess human qualities, since some of them were promoted to a higher social level. The significance of the black foreman class socially is disputable, yet it is undoubtable that its formation greatly influenced the perception of the self and the relationship between the African community and their masters.[27] Rather than dealing with the slave owners,

[26]Roberts 45
[27]Roberts 52

the slaves now communicated primarily with their own fellow members, who often were not motivated enough to be as strict with their trustees as their masters would have liked. The black slave driver was due to his "precarious" situation forced to be witty and creative when dealing with his master, and the same applied for negotiation with his kind.

The John the Slave stories are usually anecdotes based on dialogues between John and his master, the topics of their conversation being a task which John tries to evade by wise talk. The confrontation between the two is direct, John rarely escapes punishment for his mischief - but that is no surprise. His importance lies in his will to be himself, to be a human being, despite the penalty it brings: "[The enslaved] found in the black slave driver an ideal focus for folk heroic creation to protect the values associated with the trickster in their community and their identity as human beings."[28]

As individuals, the enslaved understood John's behavior, and though more focused on individual advantages, his image resonated with and molded the entire community, as he was promoted, for the first time, to a human character. Also, personal gain stopped being a threat to society, since the danger this behavior was a reaction to, came from the outside.

2.4 Conjure Tradition

Conjure tales first appeared during the period of black chattel slavery. They were based on a strong trickster-like character of the conjurer, a new type of folk hero whose deeds were retold in oral narratives, and whom enslaved Africans regarded with a sort of religious awe. The conjurer's powers could not affect White people but were feared nonetheless due to the wide spread influence they could have on Africans. The practice of conjuration as such was viewed as innocent superstitious behavior; however, a lot of effort was invested into eradicating it since alternative powers over slaves posed a threat to the masters' authority. Whites did not believe in the magical powers but did in the ability to influence slaves.

The conjure tradition is a remnant of the African witch-doctor. Despite the fact that all other religious aspects of the African culture had been eliminated by the slave owners, the doctor survived, possibly because there was no new religion or education to fill its place. The role of the doctor was different from that of the priest, who mediated communication between levels (the divine and the human). The doctor served as a universal therapist for personal troubles regarding relationships, illnesses or misfortune. These are generally believed to be caused by ill-will or ill-action by one individual against another, normally through the agency of witchcraft or magic. In

[28]Roberts 53

the African community, diviners or medicine men were consulted whenever there was doubt about the future (of the community). In African American communities, people would consult medicine men to explain, prevent or help in situations which could threaten the functioning of the community. The necessity of harmony and balance made individuals consult religious specialists in order to protect the community. The principle of the trickster as a breaker of taboos is dealt with in the work of Laura Makarius, who states:

> (...) we may suggest that the trickster is a mythic projection of the magician who in reality or in peoples desire accomplishes the taboo violation on behalf of his group, thereby obtaining the medicines or talismans necessary to satisfy its needs and desires. Thus he plays the role of founder of his society's ritual ceremonial life.[29]

The taboo mentioned is the use of magic, of working the roots. The doctors protect the community from suffering personal troubles, but also from breaking ethical or social rules by attempting magic on their own. This way, the conjuring is performed indirectly.

Doctors were seen as generators of life-force, their presence was essential for the community to function properly and maintain a certain quality of life. Any evil is caused by humans, the system as such is faultless and based on the good. To look at the situation differently, under the conditions the enslaved Africans were kept in, it was impossible for them not to have any worries – they were worked in the fields, did not receive enough food, could not freely decide about their partners, neighbors, frequently suffered from illnesses and malnutrition. The medicine man offered solace and help in any such situation.

Medicine men and conjurers are not appointed to duty by any power, they need no training, yet they are not considered to be just one of us, because they are believed to possess supernatural abilities.[30] In accordance with the general African view that magic is negative energy, conjurers through their special powers are successful in maintaining a comfortable living compared to other Africans. They do not need to work: their word is law in the community, hence people are frightened into contributing to their support. Their power has been certified through generations of stories about medicine men and their extraordinary deeds in the past. Although they keep a distance from the community, their primary contribution to society is the unifying force they generate by ridding the group of potentially destructive problems:

> The tradition of African religious leadership, though manifested in various figures, had reflected the existence of values guiding action under harsh material and physical

[29] Laura Makarius, "The Myth of the Trickster: The Necessary Breaker of Taboos", *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, eds. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993) 73

[30] Roberts 71

> conditions and within a rigid hierarchical social structure. The result was a view of life in which acting harmoniously together offered the greatest advantages in overcoming forces inhibitive to survival and well-being. Under these conditions, the religious specialists, whose mystical knowledge and powers encompassed and made accessible to the community the wisdom of the ages, served as the interpreters and enforcers of the behaviors by which the community dealt with problems in the social world that disrupted the harmony of the natural and social orders. As mediators between the supernatural and human beings, their knowledge had been relied upon as a kind of insurance against the disintegration of social ties and communal processes upon which Africans depended for the survival and continuity of their community.[31]

Although they don't regard their masters as religious figures, in the hierarchy they knew from the African continent, white people replaced Gods on the highest position. Their life and all aspects of it are in the hands of the slave owners. Consequently, the enslaved believe they cannot conjure white people, since they are at the same level as the Gods.

Conjure tales were originally brief accounts of personal experiences with the conjurer/medicine man. The character of the conjurer, with his strong personality covered in a certain mist of divinity and almost untouchable by the White master, was ideal for assuming the position of a folk hero who stood up and cared for his people. The conjurer is the first character to offer help to Africans, people who were in constant threat to their physical, social, or psychological well-being. Being a trickster at heart, the conjurer is by no means a savior, but by selling his abilities to members of the community, his acts whether real or fictional, give not only peace to enslaved Africans, but also the possibility to control their lives to a certain extent.

The telling of conjure tales serves to validate the belief that neither illness nor even death is a "natural" occurrence, but a consequence of ill-will of an individual towards another. Also, the medicine man serves as a tool to help individuals protect their community, as their traditional philosophy taught them to. This tool is the only one they have to be able to control what little can be controlled in their lives (as mentioned earlier), the majority of their decisions being handled by their masters.

The pattern of the stories is fairly straightforward: narrators concentrate on the description of the illness or problem, on the magic passages, on the spectacular acts performed by the conjurers, and the miraculous cures. The emphasis of these sections has the effect of reinforcing the belief that illnesses are just the result of a disagreement, which, if left to grow,

[31]Roberts 91

could have destructive effects on the social harmony of the community. No matter what the medicine prescribed by the conjurer is, the belief in it by the people is so strong, that this belief and hope in a rectification itself frequently suffices to solve the problem. In other cases, the conjurer's power lay in his/her observations of common natural laws (e.g. phases of the moon), which to uneducated individuals seem irregular or puzzling. Most often, conjurers use their knowledge of plants, herbs, roots, barks, animal substances in combination with mysticism. In any case, the conjurer offers a vent for frustrations caused by injustices, indignities or violations of one's rights. Through the conjurer's power, slaves can obtain a power of their own, a power to handle their life.

Traditional African mythology made a clear distinction between tricksters and medicine men; however, through the progressive blending of various cultural features, enslaved Africans associated the ever-present trickster character with the conjurer, whose fantastic powers indeed played tricks with people and their minds, albeit in their view in the most positive of ways – to minimize risks connected to securing their personal interests without hurting their community in the process. Believing in conjuration reinforces the message carried by the old trickster tales that cheeky behavior is advantageous for survival in a strict social hierarchy and an unfavorable economical system. At the same time, as witnessed in the John the Slave stories, personal gain needs to be balanced with the interest of the community. Conjurers turned out to be the perfect solution to this dilemma, since they are willing to perform trickery in the name of others, and for the benefit of the entire community, and escape any form of punishment since the master's authority does not reach them.[32]

2.5 Nineteenth century fiction and its context

America in the 1880's, when Charles Chesnutt's literary career started, was a culture of short literary fiction dealing with regional topics and lifestyle. Dialect stories, the local color tradition or plantation literature generally all focused on small peculiar groups isolated from the world and put on display unique local characters primarily for the purpose of exhibiting their quaintness. Local colorists offered readers essentially sympathetic descriptions of these unfamiliar people with out-dated and simpler lifestyles or their memories, and readers expected a more or less realistic treatment of the subject. This type of realism was not aimed to be pathetic or pitying.[33] An important element of local color was indeed the dialect itself: "(...) 'Negro

[32] Roberts 103-104

[33] William L. Andrews, "The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Conjure Stories'". *The Southern Literary Journal* 7.1 (Fall 1974) 80

dialect' was molded into a literary medium, and unfamiliar and picturesque aspects of Afro-American life before and after the war were treated with a mixture of sentiment and humor to produce a popular new subject for fiction."[34]

Dialects deliver authenticity to the text and at the same time undermine the seriousness of the content. In spite of the original realism in short fiction, local color eventually brought back memories of the good old times and added a tint of sentimental nostalgia over the past which many of the characters never ceased to live in. This strategy was developed further in so called "culture tourism" stories, where a frame brings memories and the narrator's present into direct contrast. Here, an outsider, who travels to a faraway region, meets a black ex-slave with a story to tell. Typically, the traveler/reader learns through the narrative about a way of life which is threatened by growth of the nation and evokes nostalgia for this type of localized identity. The nostalgia was consciously created: the traveler, a white authority in the text, controls the black voices. These stories are nowhere close to realistic, since they are a white interpretation of black culture and experience.[35] But they were written in the time of Reconstruction - by a time when most African Americans had proved that they are capable of becoming part of the democratic system, but did not yet have a voice of their own in literature to speak for them.

Plantation literature, starting in the early 1870's, is a rendition of culture tourism with a focus on the loss of slavery. The stories contain all the narrative techniques mentioned above – a narrative frame, nostalgia, local dialect, reflections on the story by a white narrator, and most notably, the slave's regret of the abolition of slavery. In these cases, nostalgia is not for the sake of art; these stories seem to convey a certain political message which carries a strong racist undertone. Although these tales were not an instrument of propaganda, they encouraged a twisted picture of the South; no matter how authentic they seemed, the stories did not reflect reality. What supports a realistic reading of the text is the authority of the witness/the white narrator, the faithful execution of the Negro dialect and the insertion of cultural and ethnographic details. Realism here appeared to "validate" sentimentalism. The trouble with realism is, that while local color did not claim to be presenting actual facts (it was considered fiction), with the introduction of realism and its growing popularity not only in literature, the audience was tempted to read the short story fiction with the understanding of its being true and real: "Literary realism and the emergent fields of social science styled themselves as not only factually representative of reality

[34] Andrews 84

[35] Melanie Levinson, review of *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales by Charles W.* Chesnutt with introduction by Richard H. Brodhead, *MELUS*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Religion, Myth and Ritual (Summer 1999) 201-202

but also as politically progressive, in contrast to sentimental representations. However, sentimentalism had yet to completely lose its influence with reading audiences."[36]

The shifting of literary style in this time did not require a dramatic change in writing technique, only in the audience's perception of the text. The timing of these was evidently not synchronized and it resulted in misconceptions on the part of the reading public and the abuse of historical facts and the ex-slaves' identity.

2.6 Chesnutt's short stories and writing

As a member of the African-American community, Charles Chesnutt was not pleased with the image ex-slaves had in contemporary fiction and especially the stereotypical reading the white audience applied to literature concerning African-American culture. Most readers then were white, and literature was solely judged by white standards[37], making attempts at righting the situation and educating the public practically unfeasible.

> "The need and the difficulty were one, for the problem of the black in America arose from the refusal of whites to perceive black experience accurately, and the artist's task was not simply to present the truth to white minds but to change those minds so that they could perceive the humanity of the black and the inhumanities which he suffered in America."[38]

African-American writers had a clear interest in modifying the set perception of the audiences; unfortunately no black author could come out successfully with his or her text because it simply would not be understood by the white readers. Chesnutt was well aware of this issue and plotted his writing around a strategy to open white people's eyes, to "lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling towards Negroes"[39]. To show the equality of African-Americans, Chesnutt decided to use the fashionable genre of plantation literature, which offered him the possibility to include both the ex-slave's voice as well as the point of view of the white traveler. By the time Chesnutt started writing his stories, local color was nothing new to the literary world. Excellent recordings of the Negro dialect were taken for granted, and so as not to blend in with other authors, Chesnutt needed to present additional amusement for the readers. His forte, no doubt, was his capability of capturing in a lively way

[36] Heather Tirago Gilligan, "Reading, Race and Charles Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius' Tales", *ELH*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Spring 2007) 202
[37] William L. Andrews, "The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Conjure Stories'". *The Southern Literary Journal* 7.1 (Fall 1974) 79
[38] Richard E. Baldwin, "The Art of The Conjure Woman", *American Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Nov. 1971) 385
[39] Baldwin 386

superstitions common among slaves during slavery times. He used black folk tradition as a basis, and then developed his stories, unlike other local colorists, who only rewrote traditional slave tales. This creative process, instead of merely putting down existing tales, added a punch of authenticity to his writing. In the conjure tales he manages to destroy the stereotypes by directly confronting them, which was his way of breaking the preset understanding of the white audience. The selection of Uncle Julius as the pivotal character seems to be confirming the stereotype; however, by the nature of the stories Uncle Julius is actually undermining the behavior expected of him. As a result, he not only survives but succeeds with dignity.

3. The Confidence-Man

The title of Melville's final novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* suggests the presence of a central character, a confidence man. One would expect it to be easy to identify such a distinct literary figure, however, his shape throughout the novel is anything but clear. This haziness impedes understanding of the character and in turn baffles readers trying to grasp the overall meaning of the text. The purpose of the novel's confusing nature can be decoded through a closer analysis of the language used, but also by a study of the cultural context of the environment the novel was written in. To today's audience it may seem unfeasible but in the late 19th century Melville's novel (published 1857) could have been and often, indeed, was regarded as a realistic text (such an approach of course inevitably leads to a grave disappointment in the story). Confidence men were not an entirely unusual phenomenon in American society of that period and their existence was well documented in the press. Therefore the figure was not a mere literary invention of Melville's imagination, but in fact a "regular" American citizen. In the following lines an overview of the most apparent historical influences that helped form the idea behind *The Confidence-Man* will be made, followed by a summary of the con man character in American literature. The second part of the chapter will focus on Herman Melville and his writing, and finally the novel *The Confidence-Man* itself.

3.1 Con artists in nineteenth century America

The heyday of real American confidence men commenced in the early 19th century, or at least that is when the sneakiest of them gained through their criminal activities a public figure status and the press started to take notice of them. Through those articles we are now able to trace back to the past their whereabouts and methods. One of the first documented con men was Joseph Smith, Jr. who in his eventful over twenty-year-long career devoted himself to a great many various fields: vision seeing, treasure digging (both illegal at the time), founding the Mormon church, being president of an Ohio bank or mayoring a city in Illinois (under fictional identities). His scheming days started in the 1820s and finally ended with imprisonment in 1844.[40]

[40] Dale R. Broahurst, "Joseph Smith: Nineteenth Century Con Man?", <www.sidneyrigdon.com/criddle/smith-conman.htm> 21 October 2013

The most famous con man is without a doubt William Thompson. In fact, the media coverage Thompson received after his capture practically turned him into a celebrity overnight. It is a universally accepted fact that Thompson served as the prototype for Melville's confidence man, as a number of literary analysts (mentioned below) have devoted themselves to tracking the source and together they have collected evidence that convincingly supports this theory. He most definitely shaped and through example defined the very notion of what a confidence man is and became the personification of an American phenomenon long in the works. The following selection of information presented in the press shows the magnitude of Thompson's presence in the media.

Thompson was arrested on July 8, 1849, and the news was published in the *Herald* the following day. The article itself only describes the typical scheme the con man used (pretending to be an old acquaintance and asking for confidence to keep his watch for a day) and the arrest. However, the second article about him printed on July 11 in the same newspaper under the title "'The Confidence Man' on a large scale" caused a greater stir, mainly because it shed a new light on the criminal:

> His genius has been employed on a small scale at Broadway. Theirs has been employed in Wall street. That's all the difference. He has obtained half a dozen watches. They have pocketed millions of dollars. He is a swindler. They are exemplars of honesty. He is a rogue. They are financiers. He is collected by police. They are cherished by society. He eats the fare of a prison. They enjoy the luxuries of a palace. He is a mean, beggarly, timid, narrow-minded wretch, who has not a sou above a chronometer. They are respectable, princely, bold, high-soaring "operators," who are to be satisfied only with the plunder of a whole community.[41]

The author of the text brought into perspective a con man of a greater caliber, the financier of Wall street. Both parties seem to use the same method of cheating, yet the scope at which they aim and therefore the damage they can cause is significantly different. The satirical comparison of the petty criminal and the corporate power almost makes Thompson look like a hero, since he chose to do crime the "humane" and creative way instead of becoming a force of evil by entering the stock market business, bringing stockholders to bankruptcy. The critique of the extravagantly rich financial sector ends with the warning that the "real" con men are still on the loose.

[41] Johannes D. Bergmann, "The Original Confidence Man", *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn 1969) 563-564

On August 18 the newspapers of Melville's publisher Everet Duyckinck, the *Literary World*, posted another reaction to Thompson's arrest, one with a positive attitude towards him also. Apparently, swindling is a useful tool to check if people are still human. Those who cannot be swindled are in effect villains, because they cannot be persuaded to feel pity. As a result, it is a good sign that men can still be cheated if only because it proves there still is such a thing as good nature. The *National Police Gazette* brought news about Thompson regularly between August and October 1849. Since his capture did not stop other con men from working the streets (especially in New York), and many were interested in more background information about him, the *Gazette* continued to publish articles about sightings of him or others like him.

Lastly, the confidence man's story also reached the stage in a production of Burton's Theatre that premiered only two weeks after Thompson's arrest. The reviews of the farce were generally positive and many newspapers commented on the play.

The attention Thompson's case aroused according to the review of Johannes D. Bergmann, who investigated the con men's response in media of the period, was such that there can be no doubt that he is the source for his confidence man character:

> The arrest of Thompson in New York in 1849 constitutes the origin of the term *confidence man*, and the contemporary commentaries on his arrest in the Herald satire, in the three paragraphs from the Merchants' Ledger, in Brougham and Burton's "The Confidence Man" and in the pages of the National Police Gazette mark the beginnings of a long American fascination with confidence men, so entitled. (...) It seems highly probable that the events of July 1849 in New York provided Melville with some suggestions for his mysterious operator of 1857.[42]

A similar study was also carried out by Michael S. Reynolds, who points out that Melville was in New York at the time of the most intense coverage about Thompson.[43]

One can't help wondering why America at the beginning of the 19th century was swarming with con artists. Simply put, the social and economic atmosphere seemed to lend itself to particularly creative individuals who took advantage of others' trust. Perfect conditions which would allow con men to do their business undisturbed offered them a camouflage that protected them from being detected:

> The con artist thrives in moments of uncertainty, for he is a peddler of faith. If there is no universal dividing line between the genuine and the counterfeit and all of social

[42]Bergmann 570
[43]Michael S. Reynolds, "The Prototype for Melville's Confidence-Man", *PMLA*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (Oct. 1971) 1009

> reality becomes a matter of simulacra, imitations without originals, then the confidence game may very well be all that is left to believe in.[44]

In other words, times of a "crisis of confidence" nurture the exploitation of trust, which in turn deepens the confusion and blurriness between the fake and the real even more. This is true especially for constants which normally form the pillars of society. In the time period we are concerned with, the values affected by a drain of confidence were money, and to some extent also time[45]. Throughout history gold was the symbol of the divine and wealth but as trading habits developed, for practical purposes people introduced new forms of currency which only substituted for their real worth. With the split of money into the represented (gold or silver) and the representative (bank notes), room for speculation was created, since the division made fluctuation of actual value possible. Naturally, speculation was supposed to enhance values, but no one could predict what endless speculation would lead to. The bursting of the bubble in 1837 resulted in a panic that affected the whole of the United States and eventually drove people into strikes over soaring food prices. President Andrew Jackson issued an order in July 1836 requiring land buyers to pay for property only in gold or silver.[46] This came as a reaction to the unsteady nature of other forms of payment. Although the regulation was designed to prevent frauds and shady dealings, it actually caused the financial world to fall apart because, from that moment, paper money lost its value. In combination with the chaotic structure of banking (the mismanagement of paper money printing) and the practice of speculation, banks started closing down in a domino effect. Few regulations applied to the financial sector and banks frequently covered their cash with gold of other banks. According to banking and agricultural records, the panic was preventable, and with people realizing the security antebellum banks promised them was an illusion, it is obvious why bankers and Wall Street were named the key culprits of the hard times. Of course, due to the confusion, in the end everyone blamed someone, which paradoxically lead, again, to speculation: reality became a fiction.[47]

The term "confidence man" was first used in connection with William Thompson. With his trademark phrase, "Have you confidence in me to trust me...?", he essentially asked his victims for confidence before anything else. Until then, peculiar characters were diddlers (a

[44]Michael LeBlanc, "The Color of Confidence: Racial Con Games and the Logic of Gold", in: *Cultural Critique*, No. 73 (Fall 2009) 2
[45]Clayton Marsh, "Stealing Time: Poe's Confidence Men and the 'Rush of the Age'", *American Literature*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (June 2005) 261
[46]Maria C. Sanchez, *Reforming the World: Social Activism and the Problem of Fiction in Nineteenth-Century America* (Iowa city: University of Iowa Press, 2009) 55
[47]Sanchez 51

synonym to swindler), jugglers or peddlers. Peddlers didn't necessarily resort to cheating while traveling and offering small goods for sale, and neither did jugglers. Jugglers would try to persuade potential customers about the quality of their wares but the line between deceit and honesty did not always have to be crossed. Despite this, a con artist of the second half of the 19th century would have been called a juggler in the first.[48] With the rise of numbers of con men, the term naturalized and by 1859 it was a common expression. It appeared frequently enough in publishing since series of pamphlets were being issued to warn people about the criminals and help them identify a con artist in a crowd.[49]

3.2 Theory behind the con

The places which attracted dubious swindlers were naturally bigger cities where one could get easily lost behind anonymity. Thompson was by far the most popular con man of New York but he was only one of many who took to deceiving strangers. Curiously enough, even after Thompson's case circulated in all the newspapers and a general awareness about the practices of con men spread, people continued to be fooled by other swindlers. Evidently there is an art behind con games that needs to be mastered in order for them to be detected, or performed, for that matter. Agnes Hankiss studied police records of case histories involving con artists and tried to decode the semiosis of deceptive interaction.[50] She classified the results of her analysis into behavior models which she found to be constantly repeating in investigation files. The basic unit used here is the strategem, an autonomous element that can be chained into a final strategy. These "moves", so to speak, can be divided depending on their nature into strategems of content and of operation.

Content strategems introduce a theme into the dialogue that "forces" the victim to become interested in cooperating with the con man: through "stroking", victims are filled with feelings of happiness, success and well-being by verbal reinforcements; "bait" will convince the victim there is a reward for participating in the plot; the last method is called "playing hard to get", pushing the victim into committing to the scheme by suggesting it is no longer available and then after a certain period offering it for a second time.

Operational strategems serve to reinforce the validity of the con artist's statements by formal features, regardless of the topic: the "shot in the dark" technique aims at forming a

[48] Dale R. Broahurst, "Joseph Smith: Nineteenth Century Con Man?", <www.sidneyrigdon.com/criddle/smith-conman.htm> 21 October 2013

[49] Johannes D. Bergmann, "The Original Confidence Man", *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn 1969) 574

[50] Agnes Hankiss, "Games Con Men Play: The Semiosis of Deceptive Interaction". *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 1980)

connection with the victim by proclaiming some personal information and the victim is responding to it; “story-plotting” enhances the credibility of the “bait” story by including non-essential yet specific details; similarly the “see-saw” verifies one part of the story by detail that also needs authenticating.

All of these strategems can be grouped together in order for the resulting strategy to be most effective. However, although a correctly designed and well executed strategem is the necessary foundation for a swindle, what gives it actual power is, surprisingly, an element that the con artist cannot control – how the victim misinterprets it. Of course, con men are well aware of the most probable thinking process their prompting will induce in victims and use it to their advantage. In fact, the prediction of the level of misreading is based on an extremely logical evaluation of human behavior in social situations, since various restrictions apply to social behavior on rational, psychodynamic and sociodynamic levels. Limitations are caused by stereotyped expectations, i.e. habitual patterns of meaning construction related to the customary, the directly given, the momentary, the already experienced, and one's own ego.[51] These tools are necessary for an individual to interpret reality, but an interpretation is always just a personalized point of view and the difference between the two “realities” is what puts con men into business.

When dealing with interpreting reality on the rational level, one makes assumptions depending on what is considered normal or most likely. This tendency also applies to lying – people lie but more typically they don't, so when it comes to deciding whether the con man is telling the truth, or there is a mere misunderstanding, or if he is lying, victims will probably dismiss the last option due to it being improbable (outside of regular behavior). Additionally, individuals tend to believe that others adopt similar behavior patterns to their own and act upon them. In everyday life lying is restrained by several aspects: the feeling of guilt of telling a lie which prevents us from lying too frequently, we rather opt not to include much information around the lie to keep it as small as possible, and we include truthful elements into the lie to dilute it. All these factors mean that lying is most often a spontaneous defense mechanism rather than a complex tool of attack planned in advance, and even if it is not, we expect it to be so. Finally, people often confuse truth with sincerity as well as sincerity of a statement with sincerity of intention. Hankiss explains:

> If the victim acknowledges the con man's remark as truth and accordingly reflects that a man who speaks the truth is an honest man and can be trusted, the truth of the statement is referred back to the intention and validates it. A similar effect is manifested by the authenticity of individual details which interact in the

[51] Hankiss 107

> interpretation of reality. Since it would be senseless and practically impossible to investigate the veracity of isolated details in a con artist's story, those details will assume a meaning from the context. Identifying the logical consistency of a series of details (the con man's story) with the truth and genuineness of the whole story is one of the main sources of the con artist's success.[52]

The psychodynamic level of interpreting reality brings emotions and personal motivation into the picture. Projection may cause individuals to believe in things just because they would like to. Besides internal feelings of the victim, the possible offense of the con man's feelings, too, plays an important part in the outcome of a conversation. Victims will often take special measures to keep a straight face instead of admitting to something that could potentially lead to a *faux pas*.

The sociodynamic level is based on the relationship between the con man's and the victim's roles during the exchange. Before a dialogue, the con artist needs to assert what role would best suit his victim in order for him to be able to match him most effectively. Certain personalities naturally lean towards certain social roles and it is particularly important that the con man judges the victim's role accurately so that the victim is willing to accommodate to it.

As the breakdown of the various aspects of social behavior of the victim (interpreting reality) and the con man (composing strategems) shows, individual components of the theory are fairly straightforward, however, the layering of the variables causes the entire problem to become complex indeed. It becomes clear that con artists' main efforts lie in preparation and prediction, which then allow for a gentle and unnoticed manipulation of the victim into a designated position. To achieve success, the victim must be first and foremost a victim of his own misinterpretation of the situation. Elizabeth A. Hubbard points out that in effect there is generally nothing illegal or criminal about the proceedings of the con artist even when he is trying to coax a larger sum of money or valuables, because he has managed to get consent and cooperation of the victim beforehand[53]. Hankiss confirms this statement with extracts of interviews with witnesses from the police files she analyzed. Here, too, the victims claimed they genuinely trusted the con man and gave away their possessions voluntarily.

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[52]Hankiss 109

[53]Elizabeth A. Hubbard, *"Cheating the Cheaters": The Confidence Artist in Postwar American Literature*, dissertation (New York: Fordham University, May 2008) 2

3.3 Con men in American fiction

According to Lindberg we can distinguish con men based on their true motivation to the scheme or, as he puts it, "to make belief"[54]. If the prime motive is gain through deceit, we are dealing with a professional criminal. If the key purpose is simply make belief for its own sake, the operator is a booster. The gamesman practices schemes to experience control over others and to enjoy his own handiness at manipulating his victims. If interaction with others is motivated by self-creation, we can recognize the self-made-man. The shape-shifter or jack-of-all-trades is more concerned about himself than his victim partner and is especially absorbed in the thrill of changing and perfecting role after role. Lindberg's classification is very helpful in that it shows that the objective in confidence games does not necessarily need to be financially driven. Especially when looking at fictional con artists in literature, it becomes obvious that the scope of deceit springing from the author's imagination can be extensive; and instead of having a version of a particular con man model, we often meet characters displaying a combination of qualities borrowed from individual prototypes. Some literary figures might not be primarily considered as con artists *proper*, yet there still may be a faint air of shiftiness about them. In the short sketch called "Diddling considered as one of the exact sciences," Edgar A. Poe plays with the idea of confidence scheming being a scientific skill and narrows down the mandatory personal traits: "Diddling, rightly considered is a compound, of which the ingredients are minuteness, interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, originality, impertinence, and a grin."[55] Poe scrutinizes the elements individually and the resulting portrait of a diddler outlines a man who puts his interests before anyone else's, works on a small scale, has the creative mind of an inventor that does not get distracted, is bold and daring while staying "cool as a cucumber", is proud of his individuality which gives him a strong self-confidence, and above all enjoys himself. This point of view, however, is more suitable for recognizing a con man "in action" since true motivations are usually the last to be revealed.

Melville's confidence man was not the first agent of the sort in American literature. The confidence man is indeed a product of his time, and just as in reality, the literary con man experienced greatest attention around the 1850s. Nevertheless, strong fictional characters with a hint of a con man essence were being created from the beginning of the century. The constantly reoccurring features that Poe neatly captured in his description provoke the idea that the confidence man holds a significant position in American culture. Several works have set out to

[54]Gary H. Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 7-8
[55]Edgar A. Poe, "Diddling" (1850), <www.classiclit.about.com/library/bl/etexts/eapoe/bl-eapoe-diddling.htm> 21 October 2013

examine the importance of con men in American texts, two of which I will use here to review the key tendencies in the confidence man literary evolution up till the release of *The Confidence-Man*. In *Knave, Fool and Genius* Susan Kuhlmann explores literary con operators of the 19th century by dividing America into geographical regions and setting their agents against each other, whereas Gary H. Lindberg in *The Confidence Man in American Literature* takes the approach of the con man's development in time. The two systems of scrutiny combined provide an excellent overall and complex assessment of the character in the American literary context.

The two features that stand out most in the studies are skill and context. Any character is directly dependent on his or her eminent environment; however, American confidence men always make the best of their circumstances. Not only do they survive under strenuous conditions, they use unfavorable situations to their advantage and come out swinging. Their strength lies in a particular special skill, usually pertinent to the given setting. A successful combination of the understanding of that skill and context ultimately result in adaptation. Hunter Natty Bamppo in *The Last of the Mohycans* by James F. Cooper possesses the very basic skill to survive (in the wild). Joseph Baldwin's Simon Sluggs has the skill of detecting "soft spots" in people. Some skills are strongly connected to speech: the politician David Crockett's skill is to adjust the truth and please any crowd. Similarly, Ovid Bolus from *Simon Sluggs Jr.* has the ability to lie (undetected) for fun. Ned Brace, August B. Longstreet's character from *Georgia Scenes*, is capable of using his intelligence as a weapon and can turn himself into anyone he fancies at a whim. In spite of the varying degree of shiftiness in these examples, the fact that all the above mentioned are well aware of their particular skill and are ready to use it for their personal benefit is what validates their con artist alignment.

A shift in social ethics enhanced the desirability of such a flexible existence. The change can be witnessed both in the East and West, and although it results in various outcomes practically, the initial impulse triggering the change and the eventual effect it leaves on con men prospects is very much identical.

The key difference between the East and West was the nature of the population settled in the region. The Western communities were only forming at the time and there was a huge influx of newcomers. Kin and custom, which would be of significance in the East, had little relevance here. Personal history was not questioned and people had the rare option of becoming anyone by just saying so; the fresh community was ready and willing to accept it. The honesty of an individual ultimately depended on their personal moral conviction since no information could be

practically verified in the West. This inevitably impacted the idea of justice, honor or social responsibility. Traditional (Eastern) concepts rely on the individual as an integrated part of society; society then takes on the authority to dictate and regulate patterns of what is acceptable for its members. These patterns were generally based on past collective experience. With the West releasing itself from the past, the concepts deriving from it shattered. Kuhlmann dubs this "California justice" in the literary world of Bret Hart and explains its implications for con men:

> It is judgment based on the immediate facts rather than on past history, on feeling rather than statute, and on the personal rather than communal sense of person's worth. These qualities of the West alter somewhat the context of the confidence man. In a looser society he is a freer agent. Also, his victims tend to not be specimens of generic mankind, vulnerable through their common share of human limitations such as vanity and greed. Instead they are individuals encountered under unique conditions. The "game" becomes a *duello*.[56]

In the East, however, the switch in moral code doesn't have much to do with society vs. the individual. The focus here is on the contrast between wit and human nature. This shift no longer concerns interpersonal relations but an internal interpretation of experience: the ethically sound opposition innocence/experience is transformed into what seems to be an uneven battle of naivety and the cunning.[57] The development of the understanding of the two pairs is very subtle and essentially will reflect on the personal choice of the individual. Hawthorne's characters would demonstrate this as they impose their will on another character and Henry James' novels also reflect the polarity in complex relationships. The "con men" of this sort are merely exploring human nature and their environment, experimenting with their skill and not necessarily focusing on an outcome in their favor.

It soon became obvious that should literary con-men dare to utilize their power (along with their authors), they can achieve greater feats than momentary amusement.

The first example of a consciously constructed con man is Benjamin Franklin's self in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791). Franklin's character does not possess just one specific skill, his aim is to be able to perform in any circumstance he encounters (let us call it universal adaptability). He constantly challenges himself (and others) to improve and meticulously plans his strategy for life. All is subordinated to pre-calculated self-development. This pedantic aspect of Franklin's con man is attributed to a classical frame of mind obsessed

[56]Susan Kuhlmann, *Knave, Fool and Genius* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973) 39
[57]Lindberg 31

with models, reflecting on the all round principles of the Renaissance man or, perhaps, appreciation of progress through knowledge reminiscent of the Enlightenment period.[58] Learning here is perceived as the chief reward for the effort, as the mastering of a new technique or the successful manipulation are achievements in their own right. In addition, the method is presented clearly and in easy to follow steps so the readers can follow suit and educate themselves also. The guide offers technical details and suppresses emotional instances of the story to enable the audience to envision themselves replicating Franklin's advice.[59] This layout does not seem to leave much room for enjoyment; but since we are dealing with a con man, this quality is just as crucial and ever present. Franklin gained experience with fiction prior to writing his *Autobiography* when at the age of 16 he took on the pseudonym of Silence Dogood, an engaging, persuasive, middle-aged woman writer, to advise readers in her column for the New-England *Courant*, and Franklin continued to pull a few tricks thoughout his life.[60] In the case of the *Autobiography*, the central character is such a perfect model it becomes suspicious. Yet the ease and determination with which Franklin's self proceeds is so striking that it does not take away from the convincingness of the text:

> It is true that the *Autobiography* not only demonstrates the triumph of calculation but in fact relies on it; but to deny extravagance on the part of one of the most extravagantly (and, as such, unbelievably) rendered icons of industry and success is to lose sight of Franklin's comic challenge – the same challenge he offered in all his hoaxes. It is the failure truly to *appreciate* Franklin as a comedian or a confidence man.[61]

This aspect of Franklin's model self can be attributed to the jack-of-all-trades model. The emphasis is not on profit but on gamesmanship: “He regarded both conversation and economic exchange as contests of wit, and the many anecdotes celebrating his enterprises presented him as a shrewd and often charming trickster whose pleasure is more in the transaction than in the gain.”[62] To create his character Franklin therefore drew from two sources: classical intellectual models that celebrate knowledge and the practical well-rounded character: two approaches that perfectly (and above all functionally) complement each other.

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[58]Kuhlmann 91
[59]Kuhlmann 74-75
[60]Will Kaufman, *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997) 41
[61]Kaufman 50
[62]Lindberg 93

The review of con men up till now presented characters who did not invest into particular results or had only minimal interest in the outcome of their actions. In reality, with scheming con artists the opposite generally held true – the final reward was their primary motivation. Gradually, these characters were naturally adapted into the literary world. The combination of Franklin's model self with the drive for success gave rise to a new prototype, the self-made man. The means to "make it", to fame and fortune are less of a concern to this version of the con man than the boosting effect it will contribute to his reputation or social position. Making an impression is the key priority here – the focus is on his image, not his inner self. The reasoning is simple: the reward (financial) comes from outside, a personal feeling of satisfaction is not enough this time. As has been noted in the summary of scheming strategies, a successful con is carefully designed with the victim in mind; in fact, the victim is really a partner in crime, however difficult it might be to admit that. Whereas Franklin's model self is constantly obsessed with his own person, the self-made man shifts his attention outward. What essentially matters is not what is inside or what is concealed, but what is displayed on the surface. Self-made men are aware of their dependence on social restrictions and opinions, and model their presence accordingly. Their ability to recognize and act upon the importance of social status grants them uncommon mobility and freedom. In spite of this, being defined by his exterior is also the weak spot of the model, since he is defined more by a relationship than an inherent identity. The model self, on the other hand, is far less vulnerable as he holds full control over his identity:

> When [the model self] makes a self, he remembers that he is also making an impression, and part of the fun of his game is to test out the self he has become in someone else's eyes. The self-made man, in contrast, cares so much about what others seem to think of him that he cannot engineer impressions and read motives as coolly as his predecessor. If he takes over values and goals from society, he also depends on other people's impressions for his sense of who he is. Like the confidence man and the model self, he lives in appearances and roles played out for the public, but he has far less initiative and control over the parts he plays.[63]

[63]Lindberg 97-98

3.4 Motives for self-transformation

Keeping with the ever present light-hearted nature of con men, self-transformation can simply bring pleasure or personal satisfaction. When consequences of one's actions start to be irrelevant, self-transformation turns into a sport. This becomes particularly evident when the jack-of-all-trades as a cultural icon is contrasted with the model self, who is primarily driven by success (mostly financial in the long run). By exaggerating the drive for results, we arrive at a caricature version of Franklin's character, the self made man. A technically dexterous version of a manipulator, the gadgeteer, on the other hand, though similarly care-free about any expectations of an outcome, is preoccupied with testing his possibilities, just probing the options one by one and waiting to see – will this work?

What brings all these approaches together, is the detachment of the mind of shape-shifters that allows them to use themselves as tools, and perhaps more notably, to regard themselves as one. Such a step back from their activity offers con men mobility and independence, which they can hide behind like a prop or mask. This finally raises the question – where does a shape-shifter's identity lie? What remains when the mask is removed?

The most puzzling aspect of con characters is the elasticity of their personality. Matters of identity were previously discussed in connection with the financial crisis and migration of the population, but just as significant as the practical side is the philosophical paradigm of the time. Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose two essay collections were published in 1841 and 1844, contributed to the discussion about the self most prominently and defined the direction of American thought for generations to come.

Emerson famously wrote in his essay *Experience* "Let us treat the men and women well; treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are."[64] What to make of such a statement? After looking into con men at various levels in previous lines, the quote may lose some of its controversy in our eyes, yet Emerson did not write this with con artists in mind. However, it is a phrase that expresses a great deal of what was on his mind concerning the self and the world that surrounds it. Experienced readers of Emerson will know that few expressions in his texts can be taken at face value, since his technique of writing more often than not goes to the point by circling around it. This, paired with the unorthodox use of vocabulary which is then given new meaning through context, requires a flexible and confident reading approach. It is the author's belief that the writing style is an echo of the actual life philosophy Emerson develops in his essays – one needs flexibility and confidence to move forward. The uncertainty of meaning in

[64]Ralph W. Emerson, *Essays and Poems* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 1995) 210

the texts is intentional, it can push one to see new angles and explore new possibilities as long as there is a degree of self-trust. Change, unsettling, experimenting, surprise and progress are all terms native to the essays as Emerson is a huge advocate of anything that will stimulate the mind since this is what keeps it fresh. But motion is not a mere matter of choice here, it is in fact inevitable because "[e]verything is medial"[65] and "[t]here are no fixtures in nature"[66]. In Emerson's interpretation of the world all is subjected to constant flow. In the essay "Circles" we find a description of just how things are mediated and motion is sustained: the trajectory of a single impulse is likened to the pattern in which circles spread on water. Each impulse forms a circle that grows as it spreads from the center. Before this wave starts losing its momentum, it triggers another one. Although it may appear it is the original impulse that is carried by the circles outward, that is not the case, instead it is a series of impulses cascading in a ripple effect, one mediating the other. Applying this principle to life, we ourselves become sources of mediation. The initial impulse comes from within our self and meets its first circle before it projects itself outside of us. Mediation transfigures into illusion:

> Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-coloured lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. [...] Temperament is the iron wire which the beads are strung. [...] Temperament also enters fully into the system of illusions, shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see. There is an optical illusion about every person we meet.[67]

Temperament is a stabilizing element in the soul. Some sort of fixture is necessary to allow for motion since without contrast we cannot distinguish between the two. Yet both temperament and moods filter our perception. So not only is each individual's assessment going to be unique depending on their inherent temperament, a personal "lens" is further going to change in time depending on their mood at a given moment.

Understanding now the principal idea of mediation, we can turn to the impulse that sets the process off. Impulses can reach us from outside, but the strongest and most important source of power is the one we carry inside us. Emerson brands it in various phrases throughout his essays e. g. the force of truth, power, unbound substance, valor or simply character. A generally accepted term not actually used by Emerson himself but coined for the concept is authenticity. Since this inner strength is what validates all our actions (also meaning our thoughts) and thus our position in the world, it is at the core of our self-fulfillment: "Character is centrality, the

[65]Emerson 7
[66]Emerson 146
[67]Emerson 205-206

impossibility of being displaced or overset."[68] A strong sense of authenticity allows one to be independent, self-reliant:

> Take the place and attitude to which you see your unquestionable right, and men acquiesce. (...) [The world] will certainly accept your own measure of your own doing and being, whether you sneak about and deny your own name, or whether you see your work produced to the concave sphere of the heavens, one with the revolution of the stars.[69]

Now, what happens when two selves meet? A conversation, according to Emerson, is a game of circles[70], a moment in which two globes touch in a single point[71]. An encounter can set off impulses that broaden our horizon, and thus refreshing our minds. In fact, it can be stimulating enough to help our character progress[72]: if we approach a conversation with another person as a challenge to test character, then two people carrying on a conversation are ultimately two personal authenticities "dueling", each validating their inner strength in the match up, testing where they stand, so to speak. The "winner" weathers the dialogue with greater ease and convinces his partner of his worthiness thanks to, according to this philosophy, the self-trust that shines through him; the confidence in one's demeanor can be interpreted as a reflection of one's self-reliance (the "glow" is an important quality of those we nowadays call powerful communicators, people who are skillful at leaving a good impression while securing the information or outcome their conversation was targeting). To *The Confidence-Man* this line of logic is relevant, the novel in essence comprises a chain of conversations, which we can regard as pair competitions of strangers who seek means of personal validation, additionally boosting their self esteem if they succeed. They throw themselves into unknown waters, "unsettle their environment" by entering into a random conversation, and test how they can handle the situation (those with strong authenticities abide by Emerson's phrase "put him where you will, he stands"[73]). The confidence characters in Melville's novel correspond strongly with the type of man Emerson proclaims through his work, particularly since both characters lean towards a theoretical concept rather than a realistic human being and this allows for a more straightforward comparison. It is without a doubt that an inner strength supporting independence, the feeling of comfort in vulnerable situations, being ready for challenge at any time, and a detachment from

[68]Emerson 228
[69]Emerson 75
[70]Emerson 150
[71]Emerson 217
[72]Emerson 234
[73]Emerson 150

their past and society is a most desirable set of properties that would benefit any con man in action. It can be said, then, that self-reliance is the key to becoming a perfect con man.

3.5 Melville's career and style

Melville's writing style and technique in *The Confidence-Man* was definitely influenced by a number of literary personalities of the 1840s. Melville originally signed up for the sailor profession in 1839 after hesitating over what career path to choose. He spent five years at sea (though portion of this time he stayed on land in Polynesia) and then returned to New York and poured his sea experiences into several voyage themed stories (*Typee*, 1846 and its sequel *Omoo*, 1847 became instant best-sellers). Despite being established as a writer of adventurous fiction, Melville did not restrict himself to this genre (often to the disappointment of his audience) and through mingling with New York's literary society, which had accepted him into their circle, he was surrounded by a dynamic intellectual environment of varying opinions on philosophy, politics and of course literature. In this section three key figures will be mentioned: Evert Duyckinck (Melville's publisher), Nathaniel Hawthorne (friend) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (according to sources the primary inspiration for *The Confidence-Man*).

Melville's brother Gansevoort initiated the writing of *Typee* when his sibling retold the events of his life at sea, and later negotiated the publishing of the book both in England and in the United States. After Gansevoort's death, however, Evert Duyckinck, the dandy and editor of Wiley and Putnam's Library of American Books series took Melville under his wing and introduced him to the elitist Knickerbockers group of authors whom he entertained, among other places, at his lodgings at 20 Clinton place. Duyckinck's ambition was to create a hub of the highest intellect in America and to set a good standard for American literature. Melville took full advantage of the special treatment and helped himself to many of the volumes available in Duyckinck's library. It is understood that Melville and the publisher shared a similar sense of humor, and this likely contributed to the expansion of their business partnership into a friendship. Despite their brief falling out following the publication of then literary disaster *Moby Dick* (1851), Duyckinck vouched for Melville even after his career lost its luster, Melville's collection of poems *Battle Pieces* (1866) being the last book he published for him.[74]

In 1850 Melville moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts with his family and during a picnic that summer with Duyckinck and other fellow writers he was introduced to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who happened to be his new neighbor. Hawthorne, 15 years his senior, immediately

[74]David Dowling, *Literary Partnerships and the Marketplace: Writers and Mentors in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012) 51 - 58

took a liking to Melville and quickly became somewhat of a mentor or soul mate to the younger author. They exchanged opinions and generally valued each other's expertise on various literary and also non-literary topics. From their correspondence only Melville's letters to Hawthorne have been preserved, but it is believed that Hawthorne, to whom Melville dedicated *Moby Dick*, had a huge influence on Melville during the time he was working on on the volume. In spite of their strong bond, the authors became alienated some time in 1852 and the camaraderie faded out. Their previous friendship is visible in many of their later texts, where similar motives or images appear in works of both; despite this the two no longer remained in contact.[75]

Although Hawthorne is often credited for the shaping of Melville's writing style, as far as *The Confidence-Man* is concerned, Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence on the text appears to be more pronounced. According to Elizabeth Foster, the chapters in the novel regarding Emerson's outlook on confidence, with the Mark Winsome character standing in for Emerson himself, were the first part of the novel to be written[76]. As previously mentioned, the matter of trust was a trending issue in the mid 19th century and particularly in New York due to the emergence of confidence-gambling rogues. Here it is important to note that Melville's opinion surrounding self-reliance had evolved greatly during the 7-year period between Melville's first meeting Emerson and the time he commenced working on the novel. The two authors were introduced at Emerson's lecture in Boston in 1849 after which Melville considered the philosopher "more than a brilliant fellow"[77]. There are several sources that give us insight into Melville's thoughts: letters Melville sent to his publisher and Hawthorne, and also a book of Emerson's essays that includes Melville's handwritten comments. To summarize, it is clear that Hawthorne admired Emerson's view regarding personal integrity and fortitude and fully agreed with the exigency of being true to oneself[78]. On the other hand, Melville did not share Emerson's universal encouragement of trust, specifically when extended to others, since he was skeptical of the idea that trust is rewarded with honesty[79]. This attitude is clearly reflected in the underlying question repeatedly surfacing in *The Confidence-Man* – to trust or not to trust? The ethical consequences of individual self-reliance and the continuous reminder of real life con artists that evil and malice are indeed part of human nature, troubled Melville since he, unlike Emerson, worried about the social implications these had on society. Thus although he felt strongly about the power of authenticity, responsibility towards humanity, which he believed was threatened by self-relience, outweighed his initial enthusiasm for Emerson's "man-making" philosophy. Needless to

[75]Lee B. Levy, "Hawthorne, Melville, and the Monitor", *American Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Mar. 1965) 64
[76]Elizabeth S. Foster, ed., *The Confidence-Man* (New York: Hendricks House, 1954) lxxx
[77]William Braswell, "Melville as a Critic of Emerson", *American Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Nov. 1937) 317
[78]Braswell 325-326
[79]Braswell 329

mention, the rest of the Knickerbocker circle headed by Duyckinck firmly dismissed Emerson's theory altogether as selfish (his article celebrating the fact that people can be swindled was discussed in the beginning of this chapter)[80].

Melville's writing style underwent many changes throughout his novelistic career, and considering that it only lasted 11 years in which he produced 10 books (short story collection including), the evolution of the author must have been backed by powerful convictions. Of course, in the very beginning there were none – Melville put down his sailing experience almost at a whim and, basically, *Typee* and *Omoo* were written by Melville, the journalist (Nina Buym calls the style "quasi-authentic narrative"[81]). Following these, however, Melville discovered he had the need to use his texts to enlighten readers about the truths of the universe and man's position in it. Melville's original audience was upset about his new-found prophet/philosopher role that first manifested itself in *Mardi* (1849), where Melville in succession goes through the genres of narrative, romance and concludes with a political and geographical allegory. *Redburn* (1849) appeased his fans as it was designed to, yet did not satisfy Melville's literary ambitions. With his later works he refused to compromise between commercial success and the freedom to express his creative voice; and this resolution no doubt resulted in the penning of what we today recognize as one of the most significant texts of American fiction, *Moby Dick* (1851), and subsequently *The Confidence-Man* (1857). At the time, both works heavily contributed to Melville's loss of reputation as a novelist since their originality went unacknowledged. An aspect of Melville's style that discredited him with literary critics was his disregard for genre unity, which is crucial if a piece of work is judged through comparison with other texts of the same genre. It is not uncommon that genre cohesion will be taken as a sign of how elaborated the text is, and Melville's work failed to reach this standard. Yet Melville's choice of language and style was always deliberate and served an important purpose to the message he was trying to convey in his novels. Conventional genre restrictions were too much of a limitation to the linguistic features he wished to incorporate. According to Nathalia Wright:

> Melville (...) conceived of art as organic. He regarded the artists as naturalistic; the artist's work as a unit, as part of his character, and also as part of the larger unit of national character; and artistic activity as evolutionary. (...) Melville saw the world ultimately as idea, he charged art forms with the function of embodying metaphysical truths.[82]

[80] Paul Smith, "The Confidence Man and the Literary World of New York", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Mar. 1962) 331
[81] Nina Baym, "Melville's Quarrel with Fiction", *PMLA*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (Oct. 1979) 909
[82] Nathalia Wright, "Form as Function in Melville", *PMLA*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Jun. 1952) 330-331

Emerson's influence here is obvious; the organic quality of his work was frequently also criticized and as a philosopher he likewise could not but rely on language to carry his thoughts. He dealt with the situation by manipulating and bending fixed vocabulary meanings. Although Melville started his career by more or less writing empirical journalistic description, his later works were dedicated to the "inspired articulation of intuited general laws about ultimate reality"[83] The question that bothered Melville most regarding the task he set for himself of expressing metaphysical truth was, whether it is actually possible to express it through language. In *The Confidence-Man*, all that is left from literary conventions is the language; the characters, the plot, the setting, even chapter titles are reduced to hints, a bare minimum necessary to keep the novel together. Does this point to the fact that Melville decided language was capable of conveying the metaphysical truth? With his growing skepticism and the fact that no other novel followed, it can be concluded that most likely not; however, what the experiment showed clearly is that sometimes language is the only means we have.

[83]Baym 910

4. COMPARISON

4.1 Introducing the tricksters and their environments

4.1.1 Chesnutt's trickster in *The Conjure Woman*

Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* is a collection of seven short stories all told from the perspective of John, a businessman who decided to relocate from the Great Lakes area to the South mainly for the benefit of his wife Annie's poor health. In the course of his narratives we follow their progress of settling in North Carolina and discovering the specifics of the region which they as newcomers have mostly been unaware of. One of their greatest source of information, seemingly only of historical value, is the ex-slave Uncle Julius, whose storytelling in authentic dialect is at the center of John's narrative.

John's stories are presented in a cool, composed manner, the Northerner coming across as a clever businessman, a devoted husband and generally a reliable person of a logical mind and a habit of going to the point. Yet his reasoning is one-sided, as far as slavery is concerned, which limits his will and ability to understand Uncle Julius' tales – paradoxically missing their point, so to speak. John's attitude towards the plantation tales is clear from the very start; he usually listens to them only if there is an unexpected change of plan or nothing better to do, giving an excuse, almost, to justify listening to them in the first place. The slow pace in North Carolina allows for scores of storytelling opportunities though, as John observes that waiting is nothing unusual there[84]: they wait for timber to be cut at the mill in "Po' Sandy", for the spring to be cleaned in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare"; they experience a dull Sunday in "The Conjurer's Revenge". On the other hand, only in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" does Uncle Julius obtrude to be able to offer his tale, therefore his excursions to the past can't be completely unwelcome, only perceived very casually on John's part.

Despite John's air of intelligence, Uncle Julius in the unlikely position of the trickster, succeeds in outsmarting the inexperienced vineyard owner, with the exception of "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt", every time. Of course, the financial damage caused by Uncle Julius might not have been enough to trouble John; then again, a win is a win. In Southern local color fiction, the character of the ex-slave functioned only as a mouth that narrated a folk tale – it cannot even be

[84]Charles W. Chesnutt, *Stories, Novels, and Essays* (New York, Library of America 2002) 31

said that he had a voice. Chesnutt designed Uncle Julius to be not only an engaging storyteller, but also a human being. The outer frame of the stories does not get much room compared to the conjure tale within it; however even so Uncle Julius' character is more developed than other versions of black narrators in plantation literature. Through his hidden economic motives, Uncle Julius as the trickster in disguise enhances the traditional story formula by leading the tale to an ironic conclusion. The only time he is deprived of a complete personality, is when Chesnutt demonstrates the destructive effects of the slavery system on the development of the soul (as in Dave's Neckliss, one of the tales written outside of the *Conjure Woman* series): "[Chesnutt] asked his reader to recognize the ex-slave as a partially blighted figure whose very picturesqueness and value as a local color figure were dependent on the stultifying effect of slavery on his innate endowments and capabilities."[85]

Any lack of dimension in Uncle Julius' character is intentionally planted into the tales. Although he brings life and relevance to his tales by setting them in a post-slavery context, the primal focus is still aimed at those very stories. The frame, however charming and significant to the entire collection, is meant to stay understated and a mere accompanying plot line. Chesnutt's message is enclosed in the depiction of life on the plantation from the point of view of the slaves and the frame serves to enhance that for all those who either perceive the tales as nostalgic fables or fail to recognize African Americans as actual human beings instead of property. Their maltreatment of them is repeatedly expressed in the tales, from trading the mother without her child for a horse[86], forbidding dancing, signing and even love,[87] to renting good slaves around and depriving them of a home;[88] and the cruel nature of the masters is also repeatedly mentioned (setting up steel traps and spring guns in the vineyards[89], cursing so badly slaves hid in hay[90], cutting on expenses by lowering rations and loading more work[91]). By bringing an extra listener into the stories besides John, Chesnutt includes an additional understanding of the conjure tales. John's interpretation copies that of the culture tourist in the classic plantation literature, who is disattached from plantation life and finds the stories of slavery amusing at best and, not taking them seriously; Annie's reading, in contrast, challenges the stubborn "fairy tale"[92] one of her husband. The audience is therefore exposed to two different approaches to the text, which

[85]William L. Andrews, "The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Conjure Stories'", *The Southern Literary Journal* 7.1 (Fall 1974) 88
[86]Chesnutt 61
[87]Chesnutt 32
[88]Chesnutt 21
[89]Chesnutt 10
[90]Chesnutt 66
[91]Chesnutt 35
[92]Chesnutt 68

essentially compliment each other, yet clearly push the readers to a new way of thinking about plantation life sentiments. On Chesnutt's part, all this is handled very elegantly, in a light-hearted and effortless manner, leaving the reader to take their own stand, but giving an option of readings nonetheless. The meeting of Southern life "then and now" is achieved through Uncle Julius' narrative. His trickster character is fairly true to the archetype which developed from the original African model. He relies on his tongue and wit, is an interpreter and mediator between worlds of sorts and does not shy away from any opportunity to entertain himself or benefit from his artful negotiation, for that matter.

4.1.2 Melville's trickster in *The Confidence-Man*

The Confidence-Man is structured as a string of conversations between the passengers on board the Mississippi river steamboat *Fidèle*, with an introduction presented to the readers by an objective narrator. Three chapters with notes from the author disrupt the regular pattern of the novel otherwise heavily relying on direct speech. The setting of the story is very straightforward – a stranger enters the deck of the ship on April Fools day and we are left to witness a series of encounters occurring until midnight. The time frame and location are therefore very compact; yet despite this, readers face many difficulties when attempting to comprehend the text, for it is not equipped with a number of conventional literary features such as plot, strong narrator, or defined characters. The simplicity of the structure is actually the only contributor to the coherence of the novel. The single unifying principle implemented to guide the audience through, i. e. the trickster alias the confidence man, though ever present, is so strangely shattered by constantly shifting from disguise to disguise, that even a list of his avatars offered in the introduction (and a previously noted poster warning travelers about a mysterious imposter[93]) does not give him sufficient definition:

> (...) dar is aboard here a werry nice, good ge'mman wid a weed, and a ge'mman in a gray coat and white tie, what knows all about me; and a ge'mman wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge'mman in a yaller west; and a ge'mman wid a brass plate; and a ge'mman in a wiolet robe; and a ge'mman as is a soldier; and ever so many good, kind, honest ge'mman more aboard what knows me and will speak for me, God bress 'em; yes, and what knows me as well as dis poor old darkie knows hisself (...).[94]

[93]Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 1
[94]Melville 14

This speech is given to the crowd by the imposter himself in his first public appearance as Black Guinea, and ironically his words are true – all these gentleman *do* know the "darkie" and *can* confirm his authenticity, since, coincidentally, they all happen to be one person – him. Essentially, the point is that such a validation (if obtained) has no value, and as identity confirmation is worthless if that said identity is only one of many, a mere section of the whole. The first skeptic (the man with the wooden leg) brings this to attention and rightfully tells the undecided crowd that trust and truth are not the same, adding that the same can be said of looks and facts[95]. This vicious circle of the truth vs. the value of a statement repeatedly surfaces with the trickster practicing his conversational skills with strangers throughout the day, forcing all participants to realize the fragile nature of these distinctions. The reader, unlike the novel's characters, has the advantage of being aware of the confidence game and the presence of the trickster; nevertheless, there are several sources of confusion in the text. For one, there is no certainty in Melville's world – characters do not have names or their names remain unused, their appearance is often not attended to (detail in general is omitted or minimized), and with the confidence man we can see that looks are irrelevant since they are unstable or subjective personal features. The word "seem" is undoubtedly the most frequently used verb in the work and automatically undermines any information it introduces in a sentence. The abstractness of the text grows as the novel progresses and toward the end readers lose the few guiding tools they have been given for identification, such as reporting clauses indicating the authors of direct speeches. In all this encouraged chaos, the trickster who moves from conversation to conversation to coax trust in various forms from his victims, is vaguely present and yet perpetually evading identification. In consequence he is evading capture, in both a literal and an intellectual sense. With confidence men being an actual threat to society at the time of the novel's release, the process of trust-handling was not and also now is not an infrequent act and in Melville's novel it becomes conscious to the extreme. Now, the fact that one is aware of a problem does not facilitate its resolution, and in this case the constant questioning of confidence subverts whatever confidence or certainty we can attach to any resolution. The trickster, being smart and quick to adapt, recognizes the gap and through crafty dealing tries to extort as much as the victim will permit.

[95]Melville 15-16

4.2 Trickster themes and functions

The confidence man and Uncle Julius are both trickster characters based on a strong cultural background. Chesnutt draws from the very first version of the African(-American) religious trickster, whereas Melville utilizes the of-the-moment craze over real life con artist William Thompson. In the end we have a comparison of a traditional old world American trickster and a modern new world one. Origins set aside, audiences of either author immediately recognize the archetype the trickster is modeled on and this allows the authors to establish a powerful character regardless of the limitations they face in defining their tricksters properly in the actual text (Chesnutt's trickster is only in the frame of the story so the author lacks space to fully develop him; Melville's con man is rather only implied as his persona changes with every new acquaintance). To explore thoroughly the two trickster versions, the following chapter will be dedicated to analyzing typical trickster themes in the texts (mediation, humor, masks and freedom), the function of the tricksters in the texts (language and the frame), and finally the message the authors chose to convey through the voices of the tricksters to the readers.

4.2.1 Mediators

In order to be able to operate, tricksters need exclusive access. Being in the midst of things is the optimal position for tricksters to find themselves in. The role of the "in-betweener" grants them power of mobility without which they would be unable to perform. African tricksters were mediators in the services of the divine and human communities which were otherwise strictly separated. In *The Conjure Woman*, Uncle Julius connects the old South of slavery, by some deemed non-existent or regarded as nostalgic, and the new South, completely reformed and rid of its past, allegedly. The ex-slave is a history mediator for all those who have forgotten or misunderstood. He speaks on behalf of those who could not. In addition, he also speaks for himself, using the role to his benefit. His stories "negotiate" a deal for him without the second party taking notice - a sly feat worthy of a true African trickster indeed (Uncle Julius does not always succeed in obtaining his originally envisioned reward but John does inform the readers about happy coincidences occurring to Uncle Julius after narrating his stories, as having his grandson Tom employed with John[96], wearing new clothes after possibly influencing a mule sale[97], salvaging an engagement to find service with the couple[98], and using John's property for

[96]Chesnutt 30
[97]Chesnutt 56
[98]Chesnutt 96

his church meetings[99]). The secret "mediation fee", we might call it, displays the trickster's playfulness and wit and highlights his negotiating skills.

The confidence man does not possess any privileged access to a different world, but he relishes not belonging to a specific one. To him, mediation translates as fluent transition. Essentially, he is not a mediator transferring rare information like the African Eshu and Uncle Julius; he transfers *himself*. He is an adapter, adjusting to any situation he might discover himself in. Melville's con artist is a practical example of Emerson's philosophy of constantly being in flux, as discussed previously. The exaggeration here is evident; however it serves to manifest the problematic issue of consistency and its absence. The confidence man's transitions in and out of characters are so seamless that we struggle to grasp any hint of inherent identity, any personal quality.

Standard tricksters administer the peacekeeping role in their community, they contribute to social balance and harmony. Uncle Julius' tales are above all meant to enlighten the newcomers by mediating past experiences; in other words he is a personification of the region's legacy. Contrary to this, the confidence man has no obligations or social responsibilities that would allow others to benefit from his activities. This is partially caused by Melville's setting the novel on a moving ship, an artificial microcosmos, where common relationships are nonexistent, there is no past or future. The absence of natural human ties only emphasizes the con man's mobility, freeing him of moral duties and thus enabling him to practice self-reliance to the full. As a result, the con man does not go out of his way to accommodate others. On the other hand, in theoretical terms, should we consider the confidence man's behavior on the *Fidèle* as that of asserting and stimulating his authenticity (embracing Emerson's encouraging views on inner strength) by challenging fellow passengers, his actions invite the other party to practice their authenticity simultaneously. If they indeed accept the dueling game, they too can profit intellectually from the encounter, however unlikely their chance of victory may be.

[99]Chesnutt 29

4.2.2 Humor

In both works humor is a subtle quality of the stories and it is induced by the presence of the tricksters. Tricksters are entertaining by definition; they inherently must be to be able to perform their advisory function, which was assigned to the trickster model in mythological tales. Humor is a strategy that gives the audience the perspective necessary to elevate the tale from a mere story to a lesson on life. It provides the distinction between that which is literally stated and the untold value of the text, hidden between the lines. Klaus-Peter Koepping explains the cleansing function of humor in his treatment of the Greek trickster Prometheus where he states that hiding deceit under the surface of smiling negotiation reveals the hidden truth that might be a cruel or absurd joke played by natural or divine laws. By laughing at the truth we are really reflecting on it, which in turn frees us from its oppression.[100] In *The Confidence-Man* it is especially vocabulary related to confidence that reveals the double perspective of participants (ambiguities will be further discussed below), but the particularly humorous passages are instances of mask failures or falling out of roles, when hypocrisy and pretense of the characters is exposed (e.g. confidence man as PIO agent forgets to charge the Missourian passage of the new boy and the victim volunteers the sum anyway[101], or when in the guise of the cosmopolitan he regrets not asking Charlie for more money than he needs: "I could almost wish I was in need of more, only for your sake. (...) that you might the better prove your noble kindliness, my dear Charlie."[102]). Melville and Chesnutt both wished to create a vehicle for their cause and both resolved to deliver the message through the voice of a trickster, which makes the "preaching" of their truth less obvious and by all means more enjoyable. Chesnutt's subtle and charming humor adds to the Southern atmosphere and is in line with the genre of the local color fiction, from which he did not wish to deviate. Melville's humor is sharper and leans more to the likes of satire. The brisk nature of the humor is enforced by the inserted chapters addressed to readers directly from the author. Furthermore, the text's attitude cannot be considered gentle, it is rather uncompromising, so satirical humor suits the writing style better.

4.2.3 Freedom

Tricksters with their abnormal mobility become the freest spirits in the worlds they occupy. In mythology this explains the abundance of spontaneity in their actions, because they

[100]Klaus-Peter Koepping, "Absurdity and Hidden Truth: Cunning Intelligence and Grotesque Body Images as Manifestations of the Trickster", *History of Religions*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Feb. 1985) 213
[101]Melville 171
[102]Melville 240

do not need to fear punishment (if there is an authority that could discipline them, they exercise their freedom through rebellion against them). They do not succumb to any power, except for their own fancy to mischief, perhaps. In the compared texts, freedom is manifested in more common ways: Uncle Julius is a free slave and the confidence man is a free agent. While Chesnutt's trickster's freedom is not significantly stressed in the narrative, he is definitely confident about his social position in the post-slavery period, thanks to which he ventures into storytelling. For him to be equals with John is a huge improvement to his previous life (the trickery he performs on John is the kind that was regarded as brave in the John the slave trickster tales). The confidence man does not experience any such social hierarchy obstacles and automatically practices his free will as he pleases. Though he could get caught by criminal justice, his self-confidence outweighs threats of legal authorities.

Looking at the issue from a different angle now, tricksters are basically spokesmen for freedom. Both Uncle Julius and the confidence man through their example demonstrate how the valor actively to embrace free will can benefit one's condition. The restricted African and later plantation society deprived the majority of the population of controlling their own fate. The Afro-American trickster himself personified free will to his community, as he was the only instrument available to common folk to affect at least some pressing matters. The confidence man, conversely, lives in a country which is famous for its freedom and to a degree, the problem of the society is its abundance. Individuals struggle to find solid ground for their decision making as free will is limitless. They are personally responsible for their choices and must account for the trust they place. The work hands in Uncle Julius' tales can place confidence only in the trickster, a fairly easy choice to make compared to the countless ones regular people must decide on in *The Confidence-Man*.

4.2.4 Masks

Traditional tricksters do not always have masks or disguises at their disposal, though in many mythologies including North American Indian tales they possess the ability to turn themselves into animals or perhaps even objects. Chesnutt incorporated shape-shifting into his collection in several instances, however, he kept with the African folk principles where the tricksters invoke the spell upon a third party by request. Therefore here the tricksters master the transformation technique but never use it on themselves. Furthermore, the motive for disguise is not for monetary betterment. In five out of the seven *Conjure Woman* stories transformation partakes in the solution of a predicament: Sandy is turned into a tree by his wife Tenie for

protection in “Po' Sandy”, personal vendetta is resolved by transformation in “The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt” when the conjure man conjures Dan into a wolf and his wife Mahaly into a black cat, while Hannibal pretends to be a woman to spite Jeff and Chloe in “Hot-foot Hannibal”. Similarly, punishment (although not as revenge but as an educational moment) appears in “The Conjurer's Revenge” when Primus is turned into a mule by the conjure man, and also in “Mars Jeem's Nightmare”, the only story of the collection that actually ends well for the slaves, in which Mars Jeem experiences first hand what it is like to be a slave on his plantation. The temporary shape-shift usually backfires on the initiator due to an unexpected (and often seemingly accidental) twist in the course of events showing that even though slaves could reach out to a conjure man or woman (an authority of their own community and culture), this was no guarantee of their happiness.

In *The Confidence-Man*, shape-shifting is of utmost importance in the text, although the process of the change itself is given little attention. The readers are left with only men with masks on and no explanation of why they are being worn and when they were put on. Curiously, the masks are not even described, we are frequently only given one or two distinctive features by which we can tell them apart. In fact, the outer appearance of the confidence man may not be undergoing any dramatic changes since we do not witness any such transformation except for the switch between Black Guinea and “the man with the weed”, where a visual transformation must have occurred. Many travelers aboard do not trust their senses (e.g. the Missourian who claims that “nature made me blind and would have kept me so. My oculist counterplotted her.”[103]) so perhaps looks are ignored not only by the narrator but even the characters. The only exception to this is the barber, who explains to the cosmopolitan that his trade has taught him that looks lie and not to trust them[104]. Furthermore, he does not get confused by the distinction between “looking honest” and “being honest”, to the cosmopolitan's dismay. He recovers by stating that men would walk naked without masks, yet the barber again refuses to agree that masks are an integral part of man.

The main modifications between avatars are not in their looks but in their characters; they assume a new personality or role, and that is all the audience can perceive through the direct speech that is presented to them. As a result, there is no certainty in knowing who is and who is not hidden behind a mask. We are granted a few instances of transition between personas, e.g. where the “man with the weed” avatar assumes a new character before approaching the collegian reading a book by Tacitus: “(...) the changed air of the “man with the weed”, who, throwing off

[103]Melville 144
[104]Melville 309

in private the cold garb of decorum, and so giving warmly loose to his genuine heart, seemed almost transformed into another being. The subdued air of softness, too, was toned with melancholy (...)"[105]. His previous victim was Mr. Roberts, a merchant, whom he successfully tricked out of money and baited stocks for a future game of confidence. For his next victim he needs to shift from noble trustworthy businessman to pensive intellectual; however this scheme he does not execute well as he misjudges either his mask or his partner, who refuses to communicate with him.

It is made clear in various parts of the novel that looks are dismissed as misleading. To continue with the aforementioned encounter: the con man judged the book by its cover, literally, which led to failure. Another comical example is the description of Charlie Noble's teeth, which are said to be "too good to be true; or rather, were not as good as they might be" because "the best false teeth are those made with at least two or three blemishes, the more to look like life"[106]. The contradictions here seem to be sensible; however the bottom line is that we cannot easily distinguish between the false and natural unless they are perfect (which is an absurd thought), and artificial duplicates (masks passing as true identities) may surpass the original made by nature (the self) in authenticity. The progress of the story follows up on this notion, asserting masks to be commonplace and thus natural, confusing the two even further: "Life is a picnic *en costume*; one must take part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool. To come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself, and a blot upon the scene."[107] The confidence man here as "the cosmopolitan" explains to Charlie that it is his philosophy always to fit in and that does so by never forgetting to "dress" accordingly. This hints to us that he uses his masks as shields protecting his identity from the outside world, meaning that he is never his true self in public, and also that he believes that everyone else behaves as he does (he repeats this thought while visiting the barber). From what we see on the *Fidèle*, he is speaking the truth.

The masks used in Chesnutt's trickster tales hide identity based on visual appearance, whereas Mellville's costumes camouflage personal identity with fictitious social roles. Moreover, the plantation slaves wear their masks by default, while the confidence man chooses his carefully and wears them willingly. If we consider Uncle Julius as the focal trickster in *The Conjure Woman*, his mask is merely assigned to him, constructed by his listeners John and Annie. He is of course calculating with this, relying on John to deem his tales foolish figments of his imagination. In this regard, both the confidence man and Uncle Julius act deliberately and are

[105]Melville 31
[106]Melville 187
[107]Melville 178

fully aware of the effect their self-presentation leaves on their listeners. They vary, however, in their masks' consistency. Uncle Julius feels no need to change or update his and keeps the same one throughout, the confidence man, on the other hand, is consistent in his inconsistency.

4.2.5 Language

The only tool tricksters need to do their business is language. Their skill relies on their being able to talk their way in or out of any situation, manipulating information or their partner. The art of fully controlling the direction of an encounter without the other party's being aware of it, and all this only through seemingly innocent conversation, is what makes these figures so unique and entertaining. Given the total length of Chesnutt's short stories versus Melville's novel, Uncle Julius does not have as much performance space at his disposal as the confidence man. Also, since the ex-slave's character as storyteller remains constant throughout, the linguistic features applied are consistent and therefore fewer to analyze. The numerous avatars of the confidence man, on the other hand, offer an array of tricks with words worth scrutiny. The summary of the general traits will be approached through three categories: initiation of speech, attention to detail and veracity of presentation.

The beginnings of conversations with strangers are the most challenging phase of a trickster's task. Uncle Julius only needs to channel the introduction once and even then it is not forced: he meets John and Annie while enjoying a snack on a pine log where they join him to rest. The confidence man must undergo the procedure repeatedly and some of his endeavors are halted before they start, as was the case of the collegian or the man with the Indian-looking girl (chapter 17), all of whom simply ignore him. Then again, although it is up to him to make the first step, he in most cases triumphs. His first proper one-on-one scheme in the novel is an enactment of real con-man Thompson's routine, feigning an acquaintance under the pretext of a previous meeting and then asking for confidence. The pattern is then modified and reused in the rest of the novel. Uncle Julius does not need to be nearly as creative, although here too a pattern can be observed. His tactic is simple and always works - when he sees an opportunity for narrating, he baits John and Annie a line to gain their attention. In “The Goophered Grapevine” he reacts to John's interest in buying the vineyard: “Well, suh, you is a stranger ter me, en I is a stranger ter you, en we is bofe strangers ter one anudder, but 'f I 'uz in yo' place, I would n' buy dis vimya'd.”[108], similarly in “The Conjurer's Revenge” he vouches for buying a horse: “Well, you may 'low hit's all foolis'ness, but ef I wuz in yo' place, I would n' buy no mule.”[109]. His other

[108]Chesnutt 8
[109]Chesnutt 47

protests include shuddering at the sound of the sawmill cutting the wood for Annie's potential kitchen: “Ugh! But dat des do cuddle my blood!”[110] after which he starts the story of Po' Sandy, or his pre-introduction to Mars Jeems's Nightmare: “Ef young Mistah McLean doan min', he'll hab a bad dream one er dese days, des lack 'is grandaddy had way back yander, long yeahs befo' de wah.”[111] Without the necessity to impose himself, they invite him to continue. His line never gives away too much and always intrigues the couple enough to ask “Why, Uncle Julius?”. The confidence man is not as effortless; however, the anonymous environment of the steamboat lessens the oddity of his peculiarity.

The approach to detail in the texts is very different. Uncle Julius adds plenty of factual information regarding geography or personal relationships that does not actually relate directly to the plot but enriches the story and gives it dimension. So we learn that Mars Jim bought his mule “in front er Sandy Cambell's bar-room, up by de ole wagon-ya'd”[112] or that Aun' Peggy, the conjure woman, lived “down by Wim'l'ton Road[113]. Other trivia accentuates Uncle Julius' expertise on the subject or his personal connection, such as in “The Goophered Grapevine”: “Nex' spring, w'en de sap commence' ter rise in de scuppernon' vime, Henry tuk a ham one night. Whar'd he git de ham? *I* doan know; dey wa'n't no hams on de plantation 'cep'n w'at 'uz in de smoke house, but *I* never see Henry 'bout de smoke house.”[114] and also “Now, ef dey's an'thing a nigger lub, nex' ter 'possum, en chick'n, en watermillyums, it's scuppernon's. Dey ain' nuffin dat kin stan' up side'n de scuppernon' fer sweetness; sugar ain't a suckumstance ter scuppernon'.”[115] All these extra details contribute to the picturesque aspect that is typical of local color fiction (including the authentic transcription of dialect).

While Uncle Julius builds his narratives from his personal and folk past and composes them around the given situation or opportunity of betterment, the confidence man deconstructs systematically any information value his language may have (it is of significance, perhaps, that he does enter into dialogues, unlike Uncle Julius, whose tales are uninterrupted monologues). As has been mentioned previously, Melville's novel does not qualify as a light read, and instead of a text accommodated by a considerate narrator (both John and Uncle Julius are mindful of their audience), we are dealing with numerous linguistic obstacles, such as characters with no names and no looks, limited plot and a main character balancing on the verge of comprehension. The majority of the novel is presented in direct speech with minimal additional information supplied.

[110]Chesnutt 20
[111]Chesnutt 32
[112]Chesnutt 49
[113]Chesnutt 34
[114]Chesnutt 12
[115]Chesnutt 9

In connection with detail, the following lines will focus on the literary curiosities of ambiguity and contradictions.

In getting a message across, one would assume that clarity is crucial. Melville's approach does not comply with this, obviously. He implements challenges on a lexical level (vocabulary with double meaning, aptly placed in a context that will allow both) and also a syntactic level (phrases placed into a proximity that results in their negation or paradox). These instances test the reader's alertness and bring attention to what is actually said versus what is probably implied (often times this is further stressed by extremely long compound sentences and lengthy paragraphs, which require a careful eye). Throughout the text we regularly come across multi-purpose vocabulary, one of the meanings referring to confidence and the second adjusted to the specific situation: confidence in nature[116] (nature vs. humanity), confidence in art[117] (inherent talent vs. choreographed craft), faithful machines[118] (religious belief vs. blind labor), no trust[119] (immediate payment vs. resignation on mankind), pledge[120] (a toast vs. a promise), interest[121] (friendship vs. financial fee), and in the end we are all left in the dark[122] (lost vs. in the night).

Syntactically, Melville does the opposite. Instead of adding meaning, he takes it away by conflicting two phrases. Sometimes he places the contradiction into one sentence as in “From evil comes good. Distrust is a stage of confidence.”[123] or “I have confidence in distrust (...).”[124]. In other instances the denial of meaning is situational. The theme of a phenomenon being present but actually invisible is debated in several contexts, here with personal traits: “The man-child (...) like the bud of the lily, he contains concealed rudiments of others; that is, points at present invisible, with beauties at present dormant.”[125] and towards the end of the novel as counterfeit prevention: “It says that if the bill is good, it must have in one corner, mixed in with the vignette, the figure of a goose, very small indeed, all but microscopic; and, for added precaution, like the figure of Napoleon outlined by the tree, not observable, even if magnified, unless the attention is directed to it.”[126] In another example of contradiction, the herb doctor preaches confidence in his medicine and himself but also “promises nothing”[127].

[116]Melville 142
[117]Melville 131
[118]Melville 153
[119]Melville 300
[120]Melville 216
[121]Melville 270
[122]Melville 336
[123]Melville 109
[124]Melville 143
[125]Melville 161-162
[126]Melville 332
[127]Melville 106-107

Generally, it can be said that Melville avoids detail to allow the reader's attention fully to focus on the dialogs of the ship's passengers. This way, his, i. e. the author's, influence on the reader's perception of the text is as little as possible and the audience, without guidance, is forced into an active position, where its members make decisions based only on truly core, essential information provided. Allowing the readers to be comfortable would prevent them from co-operating, and any extra irrelevant details would fog the real objective.

Despite the fact that the language approaches of the tricksters discussed are opposite in principle, Uncle Julius adding detail while the confidence man impeaches it, they are both very conscious of what they are saying and how it is presented. And yet, both verbal displays come across as utterly spontaneous. This demonstrates the tricksters' adaptability, as they are willingly customizing their tales or roles to a specific audience and manage to do so smoothly and without hesitation. Moreover, we can identify their behavior by some of the operational strategems used by real con artists as outlined by Agnes Hankiss and mentioned earlier. Uncle Julius is using the "story-plotting" technique to boost the trustworthiness of his words with specific but irrelevant information, and the avatars are vouching for each other through the "see-saw" strategem, where one part of a story (or here character) is authenticated by another one that is also in need of verification.

4.2.6 Frame

For the language nuances to work, the authors took pains carefully to place every element. Chesnutt chose the route of adopting a trendy genre – local color, while Melville decided to attract attention to his language by paralyzing it as much as possible. The tricksters are both embedded into a setting that allows them to perform to the best of their abilities, the authors' decision to execute their writing through a framed narrative giving them particular power. The matter of the frame is closely linked to the underlying pattern that can be detected in both texts. In Chesnutt's collection the pattern repeats itself with every story: it begins with John's introduction, then Uncle Julius enters the scene and eventually starts his narrative, John and Annie comment of the moral of the tale, and in the conclusion John reveals Uncle Julius' personal interests in the story (the pattern is varied throughout, naturally). In Melville's novel the pattern is created by the individual encounters of the confidence man in disguise with his fellow passengers.

In Afro-American trickster tales structure is of utmost importance and can constitute a surprisingly intricate and multi-dimensional system of communication. Jay Edwards

demonstrates this in his analysis, which investigates the rules and their hierarchies affecting the resulting structure of the tales.[128] Unlike Chesnutt's collection, traditional folk trickster tales do not operate with a frame (neither does local color). Structurally, thematically and even linguistically, the frame in *The Conjure Woman* is clearly separated from the narrative of Uncle Julius. The frame is narrated by John who is recalling his meetings with the ex-slave in the past; and yet these "adventures" can be considered to be set in the present while the plantation stories are set in the past, the war being a temporal demarcation. Uncle Julius' tales are compact tales within a tale and the two narrators each possess their own unique voice, the styles complementing each other.

The frame in *The Confidence-Man* is much more complex as it is less defined and in parts blends with the rest of the text. According to Watson C. Branch, this is a direct result of the unlinear order in which Melville wrote the novel – the original set of chapters was later fitted with the frame, and finally expanded by adding external stories (his theory does not confirm Elizabeth Foster's conviction that chapters 36 and 37 were the first to be written, he believes they were formed later on in the process)[129]. His proposed division of the novel consists of four sections: (1) we follow the dealings of six avatars of the confidence man as they are introduced in Black Guineas's list (more or less precisely) and we witness their attempts at inducing confidence or money; (2) the cosmopolitan (an avatar not listed previously) holds conversations on the topics of friendship, trust and confidence; (3) the actual frame which introduces the setting with the mute (also an avatar) and the crowd, and concludes the novel with the encounters of the cosmopolitan with the barber, the old man and the peddler (this arrangement gives the novel some symmetry and sense of unity); (4) this section concerns the inserted chapters on the art of fiction, the individual tales including their commentaries, and finally chapters that seem misplaced in the text and therefore are assumed to be later additions[130].

In light of these findings, the most significant aspect regarding the confidence man as a trickster character, is the break in mood of the novel between sections one and two, since with this divide the objective of the confidence man seems to shift. With the first six avatars, passengers are coaxed out of confidence and possibly some finances, whereas from chapter 24 onward the pattern of events readers have by now grown accustomed to becomes less legible as the obvious motive for possible deception (money) is pushed into the background (the original pattern is restored with the cosmopolitan visiting the barber). Branch states that "Melville's

[128]Jay Edwards, "Structural Analysis of the Afro-American Trickster Tale", *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Winter 1981)
[129]Watson G. Branch, "The Genesis, Composition, and Structure of *The Confience-Man*", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Mar. 1973) 425
[130]Branch 430

apparent intention in this section of colloquies was to expose the hypocrisy or the impracticability of the philosophies that support Christianity, human society, and Emersonianism."[131] In other words, the confidence man continues his role-switching scheme but no longer to dupe others, rather to act as a mirror that would reveal the masks of others. By testing the strength of their life convictions he becomes an indicator of authenticity, or rather pretense, for that matter.

The frame which was added as an afterthought brings the mute and barber characters into the story. Particularly the introductory chapters foreshadow the topic of charity, trust, and confidence and bring awareness to the fragile nature of their meaning and value (aside from meeting the characters, we learn that it is April Fool's day and the steamboat is named the *Fidèle*). These chapters are the most descriptive part of Melville's novel.

4.3 The authors' message

After exploring the trickster characters and the structural aspects of the text, it can be concluded that *The Confidence-Man* has a heavily manipulated frame (very time and space specific) with an extremely flexible trickster, all this written in a challenging language; and *The Conjure Woman* is essentially a pleasing local color collection of short stories with an added frame of two narrators (Uncle Julius and John) and one bystander (Annie). We now arrive at two important questions: what is the purpose of inserting the frames into the narratives? Why did Melville and Chesnutt decide to appoint tricksters in conjunction with a frame? Perhaps the best approach to answering this will be to inspect the problem from a different angle – what does the combination of the tricksters and frames achieve in the text? A closer inspection reveals that in both cases the pairing creates a cause for friction or tension.

In Chesnutt's text, the frame serves as a commentary on the inserted tales, and not only one but two opinions are presented. John's view, which represents the view of the majority of Chesnutt's audience, clashes with the sympathy his wife expresses after hearing Uncle Julius' narratives. John's shallow understanding of the trickster tales is expressed in many instances: "'And they all live happily ever after,' I said, as the old man reached a full stop. 'Yes, suh,' he said, interpreting my remarks as a question (...)."[132] and a thorough insight into his thinking is offered also:

> (...) Of tales of the old slavery days he seemed indeed to possess an exhaustless store,–some weirdly grotesque, some broadly humorous; some bearing the stamp of

[131]Branch 435
[132]Chesnutt 43

> truth, faint, perhaps, but still discernible; others palpable inventions, whether his own or not we never knew, though his fancy doubtless embellished them. But even the wildest was not without an element of pathos,–the tragedy, it might be, of slavery itself; the shadow, never absent, of slavery and of ignorance; the sadness, always, of life as seen by the fading light of an old man's memory.[133]

Although John recognizes the seriousness of the slavery period, he considers it to be long gone and irrelevant to current society, which, in effect, makes him a passive racist. He mistakes Julius' sadness and pathos for nostalgia. Since John's impressions might be shared by many readers, Annie's character is meant to make amends by her disagreeing with her husband on the true message of the tales, which she does not regard as mere fairy tales:

> "That is a very ingenious fairy tale, Julius," I said, "and we are much obliged to you."
>
> "Why, John!" said my wife severely, "the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did."
>
> "Yes," I replied, "especially the humming-bird episode, and the mocking-bird digression, to say nothing of the doings of the hornet and the sparrow."
>
> "Oh, well, I don't care," she rejoined, with delightful animation; "those are ornamental details and not at all essential. The story is true in nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war."[134]

Annie is capable of distinguishing the substance from the inconsequential elements. In another passage, she does not hesitate to place the blame for the misfortunes directly on the slavery system:

> Annie listened to this gruesome narrative with strained attention.
>
> "What a system it was," she exclaimed, when Julius had finished, "under which such things were possible!"
>
> "What things?" I asked, in amazement. "Are you seriously considering the possibility of a man's being turned into a tree?"
>
> "Oh, no," she replied quickly, "not that," and then she murmured absently, with a dim look in her fine eyes, "Poor Tenie!"[135]

The correction of the viewpoint is only enabled by the supplying of an alternate one, which can uncover the narrow-mindedness of the original opinion. John does not grasp Annie's

[133]Chesnutt 72
[134]Chesnutt 68
[135]Chesnutt 28

hints on why the tales touch her so deeply and he remains in ignorance; the audience, however, whose members observe the conflict of opinions, is brought to awareness and they are granted a chance to reconsider their own standpoint. John may have failed the trickster's lesson, but hopefully the readers, with Annie's guidance, have not.

In Melville's novel, what is depicted is not a tension or clash so much as a struggle. It lends itself to calling it a struggle for confidence; however, what is actually causing the belief crisis on the ship is the lack of solid ground, i. e. sources of certainty. The environment offers no means of verification of information, no stability and no support to the travelers or the audience. The language used constantly undermines itself (as has been shown above), characters wear masks to confuse the public, and traditionally valued pillars, authorities or constants to man (such as religion, philosophy, friendship, nature, money or humanity) are shattered by continuous questioning. Primary instincts, particularly the sense of vision, are dismissed as unreliable, and the confidence man goes so far as to suggest that individuals might not even know themselves:

> "Pray, now, if you use the advertisement of business cards, and happen to have one with you, just look at it, and see whether you are not the man I take you for."
>
> "Why," a bit chafed, perhaps, "I hope I know myself."
>
> "And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy. Who knows, my dear sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for somebody else? Stranger things have happened."[136]

The reason why the absence of certainty is so disarming is that people tend to base their decisions on circumstances known to them, which help shape and justify the reasoning behind their choices. In short, they give direction. Without a sense of direction one feels lost and finding the right way (or any way) forward proves daunting, especially if it needs to be repeated over and over again.

In both texts, tricksters initiate the revelation of the conflict or struggle. In Chesnutt's collection, the implementation of the frame is the only means for the trickster to be included as an active participant in the story. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville aspired to minimize the volume of information presented through an unbiased narrator and to keep the dubious characters as the main sources of information, with the confidence man being the principal "unsettler", to borrow Emerson's terminology, of confidence. The frame further casts doubt by bringing odd coincidences of the setting to the readers' attention, thus even more focusing the

[136]Chesnutt 22

spot-light on the trickster. The point regarding the texts being made here is, that from a structural perspective, the tricksters do not perform as characters. In essence, their function is to generate situations of struggle, with both Melville and Chesnutt using the trickster as a mechanism or tool for achieving this.[137]

Before proceeding to the concrete themes of struggle induced in Melville's and Chesnutt's texts, a section will be devoted to the reasoning that justifies the perception of struggle as an authorial method used to maximize the audience's reading experience.

Although the phrase "reading experience" has been used, perhaps it is not an appropriate term for *The Conjure Woman* or *The Confidence-Man*. Although they are delivered to the audience in written form, their nature is distinctly verbal, the majority of both works being delivered through direct speech and the books being transcriptions of conversations, to put it simply. By conceiving of the narratives as verbal expressions, the audience or listeners become more significant in the author- text-audience relationship triangle, and narrative suddenly acts as a social transaction. Barbara Herrnstein Smith explains the advantages of dealing with text as follows:

> [I]t encourages us to notice and explore certain aspects of narrative that tend to remain obscure or elusive when we conceive of it primarily as a kind of text or structure or any other form of detached and decontextualized entity. For it suggests not only that every telling is produced and experienced under certain social conditions and that it always involves two parties, an audience as well as narrator, but also that, as in any social transaction, each party must be individually motivated to participate in it: in other words, that each party must have *interest* in telling or listening to that narrative.[138]

Needless to say, each participant will have different motivation to listen or tell. There is enough proof of this in both the discussed works, e. g. when the *Fidèle* passengers do not quite see where the confidence man is headed with his words. Chesnutt's character John, however, is a particularly apt example: he is not an invested listener (he follows Uncle Julius' tales because he has nothing better to do), consequently his involvement in the interpretation of the stories is minimal and meanings evade him. Narratives are meant to convey a form of truth, or the teller's version of it; however, the audience needs to interpret the story on their own terms for it to give

[137]The idea to use tricksters as compositional tools or inflicters of chaos is not sporadic or unique to the analyzed texts. In most mythologies tricksters will be labeled as trouble makers and their disrespect for authority is one of their primary qualities.

[138]Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Afterthoughts on Narrative III: Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1 On Narrative (Autumn 1980) 232-233

them meaning. It is universally accepted that people deduce meaning from experience since that is what forms their connection with the narrator. If following the narratives poses a challenge, the involvement of the listeners naturally increases since they are forced to be more active: this process includes repeated reframing of the events recounted, as this helps somewhat "predict the narrative course and grasp the coherence that informs the narrative and gives it meaning".[139] The coherence the audience apprehends of the narrated tale is a combination of the coherence that is performed by the narrator (formed by presentation and personal understanding of the topic) and their own coherence created through the experiential process of reframing. As a result, the final meaning the audience arrives at is generated as much by the narrator as themselves.[140] It has been demonstrated that Melville pushes his readers into this cooperative mode by relying on unorthodox linguistic features, where extra effort is needed to assign correct meanings to phrases in specific contexts. Chesnutt's struggle is accomplished by offering two conflicting coherences of the same narrative. The tricksters are tools that enable the discrepancies to manifest themselves. Both of the authors' strategies are designed to encourage the audience to realize that more points of view are possible, as well as to evaluate their own stance on the matters at hand.

Returning back to struggle as a theme directly in the texts, it can now be established what they signify. The passengers in Melville's novel long for some stability whereas Chesnutt's, or rather Uncle Julius' characters in the plantation trickster tales, miss freedom. Annie recognized that the system of slavery was what caused the misery in them, and in *The Confidence-Man* the situation is no different – the main culprit responsible for the fooling game (its scale especially) is the system. Upon comparison, it emerges that the systems dealt with are exact opposites, two extremes of societies with a problematic distribution of the same phenomenon: freedom.

Based on the evidence presented in the previous chapters on the historical and social backgrounds of the analyzed tricksters, the world as experienced by the work hands in trickster tales but also in reality offered them no role in society. Not being legally recognized as human beings, they were deprived of basic rights that would allow them a decent life (Uncle Julius touches on some of the violations against slaves: no free time, rationing of food, separating of families or not permitting marriages, the prohibition of singing or dancing, and above all disrespectful treatment). The only viable chance they had of freedom, of having a say in their own life, was to effect the outcome of at least some circumstances with the help of a conjurer, in

[139]Donald Braid, "Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning", *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 109, No. 431 (Winter 1996) 9
[140]Braid 18

other words a trickster. In their lives they endured extreme limitation stemming from their exclusion of society; free will was nonexistent.

In the micro-cosmos on the river streamer, Melville exaggerates the gradual dissolving of important social restrictions, rules or customs that the United States were experiencing ever since the beginning of the 19th century, and then full force after the panic of 1837. The economic uncertainty linked with the philosophic tendencies encouraging self-reliance paved the way to a society where independence was celebrated and the strength and functionality of communities was therefore threatened. The individual was free of duties to society. Without any kind of dictate, individuals become solely responsible for their actions and make their decisions based on their own judgment.

Melville and Chesnutt expose the unbalanced systems in their work by treating the worlds with a trickster character that defies the laws ruling them. Uncle Julius is now a free man and finds himself in a circumstance (dealing with two new comers who have no clue) that gives him unusual power. Just like in the animal trickster tales, where the enslaved beat their masters at their own game by accepting all the limitations they burdened them with, and turned the identity of underdogs into their advantage, Chesnutt took the preset model of the local color short story, and managed to deliver to the white audience stories they wanted, but with a few twists opened their narrow minds to new interpretations. His primary aim was to start a dialogue, through Uncle Julius's monologue, about the position of Afro-Americans in society, their humanity, and the paradoxes in America concerning equality, freedom, tolerance and unity. The conjure stories are a mask for exposing the horrors of slavery, a necessary screen to get the message across.

> Chesnutt's many masks enable him to thrust the truth before the unwilling.(...) Speaking through Uncle Julius McAdoo, Chesnutt is the conjure man working his spell, the physician seeking a cure, the lawyer pleading his case, the emancipator freeing future scribes of African ancestry.[141]

Melville, on the other hand, decided to demonstrate what total freedom will do not only to his characters, whom he grants liberty to speak for themselves, but to the entire novel. Literary conventions are set aside, the genre of this work not falling into any traditional category (it has been compared to picaresque novels, frontier folklore, satire, and also allegory[142]) and the language disregarding the comfort or approval of the audience. Most of the passengers seem

[141]Jeannette S. White, "Baring Slavery's Darkest Secrets: Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales* as Masks of Truth", *The Southern Literary Journal* 27.1 (Fall 1994) 102

[142]Maurice S. Lee, "Skepticism and *The Confidence-Man*", *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 113

overwhelmed by the scope of their free will and have difficulties handling their decision-making, losing their confidence, money or identities in the process as there is nothing there to guide them and relieve them of the responsibility on their shoulders; except for the confidence man who is not held back by scruple or limited by fear of losing face, so to speak. He is designed to embrace and thrive in the freedom society offers him and by doing so reveals the obstacles limitless freedom can bring to integrity and social bonds.

If we look at the two environments as belief systems, i. e. if we imagine them to be authentic cultural systems mythological tricksters operate in, it becomes clear what grounds they are founded on. Chesnutt's world is based on trust and the blind belief in the trickster, who is the only character not bound by the system. Actually, there are two restricting systems involved: the black belief system and the white slavery system. The conjurer in the plantation tales narrated by Uncle Julius is the community's taboo breaker and takes upon himself or herself to violate the sacred ban of performing magic, and although the source of this belief stretches back to African legends, it is still very much alive among the black community in America. Additionally, Uncle Julius and the conjurer are free people. In the case of Uncle Julius this might not seem particularly important since the frame is set post-slavery; however, from John's narrative the reader senses that he mistakenly considers Uncle Julius to be locked in a sentimental memory of the past, therefore it can be assumed that he does not regard the ex-slave as really free. Of course, it may be argued that the reason why Uncle Julius “wins” over John, in other words the majority of cases the stories he tells eventually lead him to material enrichment, is John's benevolence or negligence. However, the occasional disagreements with Annie show that John is not capable of giving the tales a deeper thought, making it safe to assume that he does not see Uncle Julius' twist coming until it happens.

In Melville's world the situation could be more straightforward as far as belief systems are concerned, since we are given only one time-line and one story-line, yet the fact that it is belief itself that is questioned in the text disqualifies such a notion. It must be granted that the very act of disputing belief is strikingly un-mythical. One of the most important purposes of mythology in culture is to settle the society in its traditional way of life, of giving individuals a perspective on the lifestyle of the community, of giving each member a sense of belonging. It is not so much an explanation of ways but a reassurance of norms, as norms here are not considered limiting, but rather guiding and indispensable for a community to function properly. The trickster helps create these standards by destroying the old ones. In spite of his destructive nature, the trickster accidentally (or rarely purposefully) contributes to society by helping it build its new and better version of itself. In *The Confidence-Man*, the trickster is only depicted in the

phase of devastating and undermining the value of belief. Or rather, to be precise, he introduces the topic of trust and tests its worth in the community. His survey of the quantity of confidence in society (on a limited sample of passengers of the steamship) demonstrates the shaky condition belief is in. Some place trust fairly easily in the con man, others do so reluctantly while the rest offer no trust at all. Overall, the strategy for awarding trust is based on reason. The discussions led by the confidence man seem to be rational and supported by logical assumptions. If we agree that apart from fortifying a society, the trickster's function is also to reflect the state of its belief system (or at least Melville's perspective on it), then the confidence-man accomplishes that convincingly. However, he does not enjoy the blind trust the tricksters in *The Conjure Woman* receive, the confidence-man must work hard to earn his. The factors influencing this are likely the general lack of belief in the society, and also the carefully disguised identity of the trickster, whom the passengers do not recognize as one (though they sometimes suspect).

5. Conclusion

For the final review of the key aspects of the two analyzed tricksters, the set of properties of Hynes and Doty's definition of mythological tricksters presented in the introduction will be used as a guide. Some originally proposed features of the battery will be reformulated better to accommodate the literary tricksters at hand.

There is no divine level that would be separated from the human world relevant to the texts to fulfill the parameter of *Messenger of Gods*. However, both the confidence man and Uncle Julius can be regarded as messengers since they function as such for the authors who created them. Chesnutt's motivation for implementing a trickster was inconspicuously but intentionally to spread the news to his white audience that the period of slavery is a part of American history that in his view must not be idealized. Chesnutt felt it as a duty towards the black community to ensure the message was heard and decided to tackle the obstacle of how to accomplish this by employing a traditional Afro-American trickster in disguise. As to the message behind Melville's novel, ever since the work was published critics and readers have not been able to reach agreement on one definite interpretation or any recommended approach to reading the text. It is my understanding that the novel is Melville's reflection on the growing mobility and independence of individuals in the United States at the time and his skepticism towards the ethical and moral implications for society this might have. Furthermore, Melville's ambition to become a writer of truth has been mentioned, and the fact that his novel is so inconclusive gives the impression that he finally resigned on the communicative function of language itself and its ability of it to convey the truth. The analysis of language showed that words can be easily manipulated to either hide the truth or become completely empty and useless. This suggests that the ambiguity of *The Confidence-Man* is intentional on the author's part.

The feature of the *Bricoleur* can be detected in our tricksters, but with alterations. Setting obscenities aside, working with limited resources is nothing uncommon for the two characters. Uncle Julius never had the chance to experience abundance of anything but working the fields, so surviving on little and making the best of creative skills can be considered a trademark not only of his but also of his fellow African Americans. In *The Conjure Woman* his quick-thinking aids him in finding just the right tale to narrate in the given instance. Similarly, the confidence man needs to be flexible and adaptable enough to “match up” to his conversation partner of the

moment. In order to be successful his persona must seem authentic, which means his reactions need to suit both him and his acquaintance. His primary tool here is self-reliance.

The tricksters do not have the power of turning the state of things "inside out" and "upside down" as the parameter of *Situation Inventor* implies. That being said, although they do not *change* the world, they alter the reader's perspective on it. As the tricksters are designed to be mouthpieces, the delivery of a new point of view is one of their primary tasks.

Shape-Shifting is a key motif in both texts. In *The Conjure Woman* metamorphosis appears frequently in Uncle Julius' tales and in this respect the plantation tales honor the traditional Afro-American myths (the theme is included also in the frame, when John reads a philosophical passage on the never-ending nature of transformation, which Annie deems nonsensical[143]). However, the most significant transformation Chesnutt is hoping to achieve is the one in the reader's mind concerning the position of Afro-Americans in society. Transformation by means of masquerade is at the center of the confidence man's existence and game, yet the only certainty the audience has is that shape-shifting occurs because the lack of (detailed) description obscures transitional moments.

Concerning *Ambiguity and Anomaly*, there is no doubt that the signals these tricksters are sending out are ambiguous; however, extremes and opposites are not their main domain in these cases. Uncle Julius manages to tell two stories in the form of one: under the pretense of narrating an amusing tale to explain the ways of local life he also gives evidence of the degrading treatment of slaves on plantations (in fact, another purpose can be included – his story serves him a third time when he collects the "reward" his smartly presented tale earns him). The enigmatic confidence man, through his apt use of language, frequently resorts to ambiguous meanings in order to gain control of the conversation he is leading. At other times, he obliterates meaning, too. As to anomaly, both characters strive to appear as ordinary as possible, particularly the confidence man. What sets them apart from traditional tricksters is the perspective and detachment they are capable of keeping from their activities, thanks to which they are above their game and entirely in control of the situation.

The last parameter to be addressed is the trickster as *Deceiver and Trick-Player*. This subject has been neglected until now, when all angles of *The Confidence-Man* and *The Conjure Woman* in connection with the trickster characters have been explored. It has been taken for granted so far that Uncle Julius and the confidence man are indeed lying and scheming individuals with selfish intentions, since that is what is expected of proper tricksters. In the ex-slave's case we are led to believe that he is deliberately cheating John out of using old timber,

[143]Chesnutt, 70

buying a mule etc. Similarly, the events happening on the *Fidèle* all seem to draw attention to a confidence man who, judging by the warning poster, the comments of the passengers and other indications, is bound to be operating on the ship. As obvious as these situations may appear, are they the true state of matters? Are the two tricksters deceivers?

Some form of mischief is expected in the actions of mythological tricksters, yet they are never labeled worse than "trouble makers", regardless of how serious and damaging their behavior is to others. They are never seen as negatively as liars or criminals are, although they commit the same offenses. This could be caused by the fact that the audience is aware of the mythological context, recognizes the benefits of the tricksters' stunts (in the name of reestablishing society) and learns to ignore the severity of means tricksters use in the process. Lewis Hyde touches on the ethical implications of the tricksters' indiscipline and explains the importance of not associating tricksters with the devil: "The Devil is an agent of evil, but trickster is *a*moral, not *im*moral."[144] The exclusion of tricksters from ethical norms of society is key for tricksters to maintain their neutrality between the good and bad. This characteristic resonates particularly in the trickster rendition of the conjure man or woman in the Afro-American tales and their duty towards their community to break taboos. Furthermore, the disrespect for rules translates in the case of tricksters into a positive ability to improvise and be creative. Therefore a display of unlawful behavior on the part of tricksters will never be perceived as such. A factor that strongly encourages this altered impression is the smart strategy tricksters employ – they aim at the natural weaknesses (instincts even) of the other participants involved, whom we regard as victims. Hyde describes the scheme in hunting terms: "Trickster commonly relies on his prey to help him spring the traps he makes."[145] Unintentional cooperation as the method used by real life con artists (as discussed earlier) places the responsibility for any unfavorable outcome on the victim, even if they were manipulated into the decision that later hurts them. Confidence men, although culprits and initiators of problems, manage to shift the actual blame away from themselves. In this sense, tricksters balance on the borders of ethical wrong and legal breach.

To sum up, it is acceptable and usual behavior for tricksters to deceive. Does this, however, mean that foul play is always involved? This question is especially pressing in *The Confidence-Man*, where readers are led to believe they are witnessing a string of schemes. It might be surprising to many that upon close inspection, there is no evidence of a scam in the novel. It must be noted, though, that in the early chapters a suspicious connection between Black

[144]Hyde 10
[145]Hyde 19

Guinea and the "man with the weed" is hinted at when the cripple "finds" the fallen business card of the good merchant. The "man with the weed" addresses Mr. Roberts by his name in the following chapter, although according to the good merchant they have never met, suggesting that the card "made its way" from Black Guinea to the "man with the weed." Nonetheless, this is the only instance of peculiar coincidence in the text. Jeffrey L. Duncan bases his interpretation of Melville's novel on the apparent innocence of the confidence man character:

> The readers who see in *The Confidence-Man* a bitter exposure of confidence, misinterpret the book entirely. The more careful reader will find no evidence at all that in any of his guises the confidence man defrauds anybody. The men exposed in the book are not the herb-doctors or the Frank Goodmans, but the Charlie Nobles, Mark Winsomes, and Egberts. The latter are men whose intellectual principles have frozen their hearts. Each is sufficient unto himself and feels no sympathy or generosity towards the poor and miserable among his fellow travelers.[146]

Understandably, the text's constant questioning more than invites readers to misinterpret, and the reversal of roles between the cheating trickster and the inhumane intellectuals is an unexpected twist indeed. The trick Uncle Julius pulls off is comparable, since in both cases the stories or encounters seem to be designed for the trickster's own profit, and yet they carry an important message about American society. It is as if the tales on the personal level where the "deceit" is embedded, are masking the second level of the narrative, the one where a deeper "truth" about humanity is planted. Uncle Julius, as Annie rightly observes, is telling the terrible story of slavery, and the confidence man is reflecting the state of faith humans have in one another. In the end it seems that the primal messages of truth are disguised by lies, so to speak. In Afro-American vernacular "to lie" means to tell stories[147]. The confidence man also "tells lies" by reinventing himself (and thus obscuring his true identity) better to match the various passengers he meets. However, the tricksters are only behaving in this manner to reflect the lies and hypocrisy of others.

At this moment it is necessary to step away from the trickster characters of Uncle Julius and the confidence man to look at the authors who created them. From the structural and thematic features analyzed in both texts, it becomes obvious that the trickery does not limit itself to the pages of the texts. In fact, the communications the readers are witnessing, are directly duplicated in a meta-frame: what we see are tricksters in conversation with acquaintances who

[146]Jeffrey L. Duncan, *Words and the Word in Emerson*, in: *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 9, No. 1/2 (Spring – Autumn 1976) 44

[147]Bernard W. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) 79

are ignorant in one way or another. The tricksters apply their language skills in general to make a point and enlighten their audience. Moving a level higher, to the author-audience-text triangle, it emerges that Chesnutt and Melville are in the position of the tricksters, and just like them they are drawing on their creative skills, this time literary, to accost the readers. *The Conjure Woman* and *The Confidence-Man,* portraying an exchange of opinion, are mirrors for the reading approach and experience, by which the authors are hoping to produce the same effect as their tricksters – to evoke a revelation or start a discussion. It may be argued that any text serves to spread the opinions of its author. It must be remembered, however, that here, due to the presence of tricksters, the authors succeed in advancing their messages quite unnoticed. The tricksters (as characters) absorb all the attention of the readers, and serve the authors as message-bearers as well as, paradoxically, decoys that allow for distance between the authors and that very message. By not preaching their opinions obviously, the authors achieve a more subtle dawning of the truth on their readers, who are therefore more likely to accept it. The phenomenon of the trickster is essential to make this technique of indirect communication between the author and the reader work, since it enables duality (of meaning, worlds and perspective) and in this light the trickster functions as a device or tool, carefully devised and executed by the authors.

So, should Uncle Julius and the confidence man be considered deceivers? In my opinion they, and above all their authors, Charles W. Chesnutt and Herman Melville, are not swindlers but rather trick-players with excellent balancing skills – for the line between calculation and deceit is very fine[148].

[148] *Page Eight*, prod. Heyday Films, dir. David Hare, 2011, 32 min 45 sec.

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